Dead Worlds

Necrospace - 2

Sean-Michael Argo

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Annotation

They are bold, daring, reliable… and doomed. The salvage marines of Tango Platoon have gone up against everything from space pirates and resistance fighters to savage mutants and the heavily armed elite troopers of Helion Corporation. By all accounts they are some of the most battle-hardened veterans in the fleet and experts at hostile salvage operations. The marines are pulled off a low risk contract and placed at the vanguard of tremendous planetary scale conflicts that will have them locked in furious battle for control of a subterranean underworld infested with brutal street gangs and monstrous creatures before pushing them to the bleeding edge of the known universe and pitting them against a city of the mechanized undead. For Samuel Hyst freedom is just out of reach and always seems one more volatile mission away.
From the Author Thank you for joining me in Necrospace… The adventure continues in: • Salvage Marines (Book 1) • Dead Worlds (Book 2) • Trade War (Book 3) • Ghost Faction (Book 4)* * * You might also like my other tales of war and adventure: • Gladiators vs Zombies • Wasteland Survival Guide • Black Metal: The Orc Wars • Ember Days: An Urban Fantasy Novel

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Sean-Michael Argo
DEAD WORLDS

PROLOGUE

It is the Age of the Corporation; where the common man toils under the watchful eye of the elite and their enforcers. The rule of law has long been replaced by the politics of profit. For many centuries the Covenants of Commerce have ruled mankind, from boardroom to factory floor, from mine deep to fertile field, and upon the battlefields of heart, of mind, and distant star.

The dark ages of feudalism have returned with capitalistic ferocity, and while there is no peace amongst the stars of mapped space, business is booming.

Impoverished workers drown in debt while they labor for subsistence income, mercenaries of every kind wage war under the banner of any company willing to meet their price, scavengers and space pirates loot what they can, all to the backdrop of a ceaseless struggle for economic dominance.

To be a human being in such times is to be one among countless billions in a civilization spread across a vast universe, all ensnared in the same blood-soaked web of capitalism, most doomed to be ground to dust amidst the gears of progress. There are some people however, those rare few, who rise from the ranks of the faceless masses, to make their mark upon history.

This is one such tale.

1. ON THE FRONTIER

Sura Hyst slowly opened her eyes as the lighting on her faux window unit gradually shifted to day cycle. The artificial sunlight panel was intended to help citizens maintain their health and mental state, though Sura had grown to loathe it. Teague lay next to her, on his side and facing away from the panel, still asleep. Sura remained still and fought to remember the dream, to capture the details of it and run them over and over in her mind as she desperately searched for meaning in it.

Her parents had been believers in dreams, at least the sort one had while sleeping. They had instilled in her very early in life that paying attention to them was important; whether or not they were simply the mind sorting and cataloging the events of the day or perhaps something that came from deeper within.

As an artist, Sura had always found value in her dreams, though all she found in this one was heartbreak and a familiar ache of longing. She knew at this very moment her Samuel was out there in necrospace, scavenging and fighting whatever horrors the universe saw fit to hurl at him. The man had killed, lost friends, and even been injured nearly beyond repair, and yet still he soldiered on for his family. All the while she waged the war at home, a bitter and grinding struggle against loneliness, despair, and the mundane minutiae of raising a child alone in the vastness of Baen 6.

They had a plan, a dream that they shared of a life away from Grotto space. Of forests and open spaces, of natural food and clean water, and the freedom of simplicity. It had been a good dream; one they'd both held burning in their hearts, undaunted by the wars Samuel fought or the carnage he witnessed.

They had been saving aggressively, and they knew that if things continued as they had been then by the time Orion was ten they would be able to leave Grotto space as a family with enough resources to start a homestead on one of the distant worlds of the frontier. They would travel to the frontier and carve out a place for themselves amongst the free stars of unmapped space.

That was before Tetra Prime.

Samuel typically spent only one or two months out of any calendar year at home and they had prepared themselves for that. To achieve their frontier dream it seemed worth it. What was ten years of their lives compared to the lifetime of their children and their children's children away from the shackles of Grotto's debt-based society? It was a hard tithe, but one they chose to pay, and it had been a functional arrangement for a few years.

However, when Samuel returned from Tetra Prime he was a changed man. He had witnessed the horrors of war plenty of times before, though to hear him tell it Samuel had seen the inherent atrocity in the business of war itself.

Sleep came hard for him, and he often awoke in the night covered in sweat and calling out for someone named Bianca, other times Ben, or his former squad leader Mag.

Samuel did not like to share war stories, instead preferring to talk salvage and space travel. On one occasion though, he had awoken in the night and needed to talk. It seemed as if he was still half asleep, describing the death of Andrea Baen, how her body looked as it sprouted bright red ice crystals that spun in the lazy arc of zero gravity.

She did her best to let it all go, and sometimes, she could. Samuel was out there risking his life, and she knew that men and women who shared such experiences often formed a kind of bond.

Samuel never mustered the courage to tell her about other women he slept with, though Sura knew her husband well enough to know that Samuel was carrying guilt that wasn't all war related. She could see it in his eyes when he looked at her, even feel it in his body when they made love; her silent forgiveness of a transgression he never confessed was part of her war, and she fought it as best she could. Sura was a woman with her own needs, and Teague wasn't the first man she'd brought into her bed since Samuel had shipped out just over five years ago.

Bedding 'Reaper wives' was something of a sport among men who lived in some of the less than savory quadrants of the city. Sura herself cared little for what they thought or said. Teague was a good man, and she was confident he didn't see her as a trophy, but had actually begun to fall in love with her. It was sweet, though that same fact meant that she would have to send him away soon. In truth, Sura knew that once Teague was gone there could be no more after him, regardless of her wants and needs. Orion was beginning to reach an age where Sura knew that he would begin to ask questions, about his father, about his mother's 'special friends', and soon even the physical comfort of a man's body would be lost to her.

Sura wished she could fall asleep again, to find herself in that dream, though without Samuel there it meant little. He could die at any moment out there, and though his death benefit would be sufficient to wipe out much of their debt, Sura and Orion would still be trapped in the Grotto life, only without Samuel. Sura wept quietly into her hands, doing her best not to wake Teague as she lost her willpower to hold it back any longer.

"This is the job," she whispered to herself, and clenched Samuel's

spare Reaper tag in her fist as she blinked back her tears and put on a faux smile before getting up to help Orion with his breakfast, “This is the job.”

2. A DAY OLDER AND A DOLLAR DEEPER

> "Mister Hyst, the injury to your spine would have left you paralyzed from the neck down, though due to the extensive bone and nerve damage the possibility of your expiration due to complications in the weeks and months post-surgery was exceptionally high.
>
> You were unconscious and deemed unable to give consent to alternative procedures, however, pursuant to Reaper Battle Protocol 16, the Tango Platoon Commander, Wynn Marsters, was on hand to execute those decisions on your behalf. With the executor's consent an Augur cybernetic spinal unit has been installed in place of your damaged bone and nerve tissues.
>
> It is important that you are aware that neither the unit nor the installation, are covered by the Standard Reaper Health and Wellness Plan provided by Grotto Corporation. As such, please find the attached invoice.
>
> If you are not able to pay the amount in full, a financial administrator has been assigned to your account and is available to negotiate a low interest payment plan that will best suit your financial capacity."

The typed letter fell from Samuel's hands and landed on the floor as he groaned and put both of his hands to his head. Samuel was sitting up in the cramped bunk space of the Reaper tug as it plodded through space towards the planet Vorhold. According to the mission clock they were only three hours from being planetside, so the marines were rousing from their bunks and heading to muster.

Samuel had been pouring over his finances, trying for what seemed like the thousandth time to make some kind of sense of his predicament, to guesstimate how many more years of Reaper duty he would have to endure before he and his family could leave Grotto. It had been nearly eighteen standard months since the battle on Tetra Prime, and still he awoke with nightmares about the mech.

Back on Baen 6 his wife Sura continued to work part-time to help Samuel chip away at the mountain of debt their family owed Grotto Corporation. With what remained of their two life-bonds, the usual costs of living, and now Samuel's monumental medical expenses, the only way they were going to make any progress beyond just paying the interest on what they owed, let alone trying to save for

expatriation and a homestead, was for Sura to return to work.

Samuel had found himself actively hoping for combat deployments. The chance to earn the increased hazard wages that accompanied hostile salvage ops would go a long way toward eliminating his debts even if it did increase his chances of being killed on the job.

In the time since his injury the Baen Reaper fleet had been pulling operations in parts of necrospace that had been somewhat picked clean. The scavengers and pirates on the Red List had little in the way of heavy extraction equipment, much less the kind of tug ships to haul scrap tonnage the way the Reapers did.

In many ways it made Samuel feel as though the Reapers were the apex scavengers of the galactic ecosystem, like the bone worms sometimes found in the cesspools beneath Assemblage 23; unstoppable scavengers who mowed over anything weaker and ate them alive.

His father had taken Samuel down there once, when he was only ten, to show him the bowels of the forge. That had been back when the Hyst family had still hoped to secure a place for Samuel at his father's side.

Under the massive forge was a hub of network waste tunnels, where inedible bio-mass from three nearby food processing plants was piped in and channeled to various dump exits. Part of the function of Assemblage 23 was to maintain the hub, patching pipes to replacing valves, in addition to fabricating the materials for the other hubs and tunnel networks throughout the Bean system.

For the indentured workers of Baen 6, being part of the Assemblage crew was about as prestigious an achievement as was possible without being born into a wealthy family.

It had been with pride that Samuel's father had helped the boy don a hazard suit to venture with him into the subterranean darkness.

Samuel's father was happy to show young Samuel how the molten slag or toxic runoff from the forge would inevitably breach some of the tunnels beneath. No matter what they did to stop spillage it would always happen, and even when it didn't, parts would just sometimes fail.

That was the lesson of industry on such a massive scale, that everything found a way of breaking down somehow over time. It was the same for the human body, thought Samuel as his wandering mind returned to his chamber and the mission clock as it steadily counted down.

Ben was leaning against the wall in Samuel's chamber, having dropped by to check in on his friend before muster. After the letter fell from Samuel's hands the bulky soldier knelt down and picked it up. He'd seen Samuel reading it over and over, crunching numbers on his

data pad, and his friend's face was always grim at the end of it.

"No matter how many times you read that letter or how many times you punch those numbers I'm pretty sure the answers are going to be the same," laughed Ben with false mirth as he folded up the paper and returned it to the small stack of files on Samuel's nightstand.

"Well, at least the lifetime warranty on your new hardware is made null and void if you engage in any routine heavy lifting or take part in any military or security force activities."

"You always see the upside so clearly?" grumbled Samuel as he got to his feet and grabbed his deck jacket, "Or just when it's not you getting saddled with another life-bond's worth of debt?"

"Come on, man, lighten up, I'd rather you be fit to fight than be a head on a stick," said Ben as he opened the door and held it for Samuel to walk through, "Can't get paid just sitting around right? Besides, Grotto disability payments are barely enough to keep people out of debtor's prison, much less raise a family."

"I get it Ben, really, I do. I just get pissed sometimes that I wasn't able to make that choice for myself," responded Samuel as the two men walked down the narrow corridor of the barracks section of the tug, slowly making their way towards the main hold, "I now owe Grotto more money than I did before we hit the ground on Tetra Prime."

"Mags would say that you just had some bad luck, and then something snarky about how you're still alive when folks like her got early retirement," whispered Ben as they passed several crewmen in the hallway, "You're here, I'm here, and we're still in the game."

"I swear, Ben Takeda, it's like you took an elective course on speaking in clichés," Samuel retorted as they reached the service shuttle that would carry them through the engineering sections of the ship on their way to the staging area, "But I get it, the numbers don't lie. I can't believe I'm saying this, but I'm actually glad we've finally pulled a hostile salvage."

"Is blasting somebody going to get you some payback jollies?" scoffed Ben as the shuttle rumbled along the enclosed passage, taking them through the bowels of the ship.

"I'm thinking about pay*days*, brother, you were at the same mission briefing I was," said Samuel, nodding to Virginia Tillman and Harold Marr as the four Reapers fell into step together towards the staging area, "A city with an upspire the size they showed us will have a downspire easily ten times the size once you factor in the unrecorded expansions and abandoned ventures and that's just what's been mapped."

"It'll be a bigger haul than our entire tour with Hive Fleet 822,"

added Ben as he punched his fist into his open hand. “Not that I’m looking forward to spending months or years wading through sewage having to look over my shoulder for toxic mutants while I’m trying to weld.”

“That’s why we got Prybar here,” kidded Harold as he clamped his hand on Samuel’s shoulder, “He kills monsters.”

“Vorhold sounds like a nightmare,” Virginia chimed in, “What the shift manager said about the landscape of downspire reminds me of being in Mining Unit 5597, and Prybar isn’t in Squad Marsters, Harold, so we’re probably going to be on our own.”

“Hey, at least it has gravity,” answered Harold while the group passed through the sliding door and into the bustling staging area. “If I live the rest of my life without another zero-g firefight I’ll call it a win.”

“Well, don’t you lot sound like a bunch of hardass war veterans,” hailed a smiling Jada Sek as she sauntered over to the group, already kitted out in her combat armor.

The group continued to swap pleasantries as they were joined by Spencer Green and George Tuck, who had several recent Reaper recruits tailing behind them. As Samuel looked over the new faces he had to remind himself that he’d known these people for nearly eighteen months. In the years since Samuel’s first deployment there were only six of his boot camp comrades still alive and serving in Tango Platoon. He had always done his best to remember the names of the other Reapers who joined the unit, though beyond Bianca Kade he couldn’t manage to hold their names on his tongue for more than a few months at a time. Samuel was positive that Mag would have had some phrase of pithy wisdom or at least a redemptive shrug to help Samuel make sense of it.

It was common for soldiers to form lifelong bonds with their boot camp comrades, which was part of why command kept new recruits in the same unit after they graduated. The downside to that, in Samuel’s thinking, was that the new blood and the old blood tended to stick to themselves both on and off duty. In a morbid moment of clarity, Samuel found himself looking at the recruits and realizing that after a year or more of Reaper duty they weren’t really recruits any more, and that they likely saw Samuel and the other veterans in much the same light as he had once seen Mag. Samuel looked away from the soldiers and let his gaze take in the grand spectacle of the staging area as Ben slugged his shoulder and pointed.

“Wow, it really has been a long time since we’ve deployed heavy,” breathed Ben as he looked out across the staging area, “I’d almost forgotten just how much hardware we can drop on a target.”

It was indeed a grand sight, thought Samuel as he took in the full

sight of the staging area. Dozens of bulky salvage craft that would transport all of the Reaper non-combat gear were being fueled and taken through the pre-flight rituals. Unlike the more compact ship-to-ship assault pods, the troop transports were large rectangular craft designed to house entire platoons, along with their reserve ammunition caches, spare armor, and a portable med-bay unit. In the personnel quadrant of the bay there were dozens of other platoons performing a final refit on their weapons while they waited to board their launch crafts.

Boss Ulanti, Boss Marsters, and the other platoon leadership officers entered the bay through an elevator hatch, presumably having just been given their final briefing by the shift manager. Boss Ulanti looked over at the group of Reapers and gave them a curt nod. It was time to suit up and go get some.

Samuel's heart started racing, and the familiar pre-war rush filled him. Hazard deployments paid the best, and as the merc, Imago, had told him so long ago, it was all about maximizing the day rate. Samuel had spent over a year on basic salvage duty, and that was never going to get his family out from under Grotto's heel. The prospect of a combat salvage tour inside one of the largest spire cities in mapped space had given Samuel the ray of hope he desperately needed.

He just had to survive it.

3. SPIRE CITY VORHOLD

Tango Platoon had arrived in time to witness the final death throes of what was once a proud spire city that served as the capitol for a planetary venture gone bankrupt. The planet was called Vorhold, and prior to liquidation, was a mighty factory world, with one mega-city by the same name dominating much of the planet's three continents.

Pirates had swarmed out of deep space to wreck the shipping lanes that were now unprotected by the usual corporate security forces, effectively isolating Vorhold as its economy rapidly crumbled.

The Vorhold Venture elites defaulted on everything and sold the whole planet to Grotto, which is what brought the Reapers to sit astride former Vorhold cor-sec armored transports as the column wound its way through the once glittering streets of the city.

Samuel recalled from the brief, that the Vorhold Ventures Corporation had made some bad gambles on the derivatives market and had been doing so for many decades. When the market turned against it, Vorhold Ventures had defaulted on a number of trades and loans, creating a cascading effect where one corporate enemy after another ceased trade with Vorhold. While perhaps in other, gentler times, such business brutality would have been spun in a more positive light, this was Grotto, and the Reapers got their briefings as raw as they came.

As a factory world Vorhold had been dependent on the importation of necessities like food and water, so, thanks mostly to the aggressive intervention and embargos by creditor corporations, such basic needs were almost immediately in short supply.

Now, refugees clogged the streets, standing shoulder to shoulder as they pushed and shoved to gain a better position in the haphazard food lines. They had been forced from the city proper at gunpoint by the cor-sec units that had bonded with Grotto. While once the cor-sec had patrolled the streets, fought gangers from within, and defended the city from without, they had also sold themselves to Grotto.

The cor-sec had, under close Grotto supervision, emptied the above ground portions of the spire city, commonly known as upspire. Now there were millions across the borders of the city proper who lived in tent cities and relied exclusively on Grotto and their new cor-sec allies for food, shelter, and medicine. In the days since planetfall, the situation had gone from dire to worse as the one-time citizens of Vorhold learned the hard way what it was like to belong to a corporation that declared bankruptcy.

The sound of so many thousands of voices raised in need and

protest was not unlike being in battle as far as Samuel was concerned.

From his vantage point atop the re-appropriated armored transport, he had a clear field of vision across the sea of humanity as it swelled and broke against the hastily constructed barricades that separated them from the food and water.

Behind the ceramic battlements was a refugee relief center that had been erected by the newly bonded cor-sec forces. Samuel and the other members of Tango Platoon could feel the waves of anger and resentment pouring from the mob, and each silently gave thanks that they were the outsiders to this spectacle. The marines scanned their perimeter in all directions, prepared to engage at a moment's notice.

The Reapers were combat soldiers and salvage operators, and had neither the training nor the disposition to be utilized for crowd control. However, thought Samuel, as he checked the safety on his combat rifle and gripped the handle for reassurance, neither did the former Vorhold cor-sec. From what Samuel witnessed it looked as if the cor-sec forces were just as likely to set off the spark of violence as the angry mob.

The seven vehicles that constituted the Reaper column broke through the lines of the mob and pushed across the makeshift grated roads and tent cities to move deeper into the freshly abandoned spire city proper.

As Samuel looked at the vast urban sprawl before him he shuddered, not just because of the size, but also because of the realization of the brutal door-to-door and street-by-street fighting that was about to happen here.

"What is Grotto going to do with an empty city?" asked Ben as he turned his helmeted head back to face Boss Marsters.

"You're not looking at it like one of the Anointed Actuaries," answered Marsters, as he too took in the magnificent and strange view, "Grotto intends to depopulate the city and scrap most of the buildings."

"They're likely to maintain only a few of the forges and a minimal cor-sec presence," added Boss Ulanti over the com-bead, "They'll keep the forges and maintain the shipping lane, but that's about it. Everything else is going to be liquidated."

"What about the people?" Virginia asked, keying into the platoon channel on her com-bead, "I thought we were sweeping out armed gangs and militia clans. Aren't the refugees going back to their homes?"

"Tillman, you've been a Reaper long enough to know that the shift manager never tells us the whole story," snorted George Tuck from his seat near Spencer and Boss Ulanti, "Grotto is liquidating the people too. They're assets, just as much as the buildings."

“Ah, yes, the projected value of their labor,” Patrick chimed in with a grim laugh, “Makes sense, they might not be Grotto, but our corporation will treat them like they do us. I’ll bet you they have to agree to a life-bond or pay the expatriation fee.”

“But the elites are gone, they left when Vorhold pulled out, everyone here is a low-rating worker,” protested Virginia, “There’s no way any of them have that kind of cash, regardless of whether or not Vorhold was a life-bond economy.”

“Red List,” said Boss Marsters, and his words cut across the conversation like a knife, silencing all but his voice.

“They’ll join Grotto or pay the expatriation fee as a way of covering their portion of the outstanding Vorhold debt. Otherwise they’ll be put on the Red List and then it’s open season,” said Boss Ulanti as she nodded her head, “Anyone who doesn’t bond or pay will be classified as a hostile.”

“So while we’re down in the sewers playing hide and seek with real gangers, those cor-sec forces who bonded with Grotto will liquidate the population,” growled Marsters. “Once we’ve purged downspire the real salvage work begins.”

“Man, when cities die they die hard,” said Harold, as he tapped his armored fingers against the barrel of his heavy machine gun.

The conversation died down after that, and Samuel was glad for it. He’d always been equally fascinated and terrified by the Red List.

To live in the world without a corporation seemed as alien to him as living in the world without the basics of survival.

A man needed the support of an institution greater than himself, didn’t he? What hope could there be for the people who chose to scorn Grotto’s offer of bonding? No doubt they would flee, using every available ship, registered or unregistered, that they could charter, stowaway on, or capture.

The shift manager had warned against a sharp increase in acts of piracy from the refugee population, though Samuel had not quite made the connection until the Bosses spelled it out for him. The people of Vorhold were being given the choice between slavery, death, or exile, and Samuel shuddered at the prospect. At least he and the other people born into Grotto were shackled with their life-bond at an early age, so had years to work against it. Those Vorhold citizens who bonded were old enough that they would certainly die in debt and poverty. Samuel had to remind himself, however, that poverty was relative, and though he had known no masters beyond Grotto, he had yet to go hungry as its subject. The wargir, Imago, was right, being on the Red List was freedom, but of a darkly desperate sort.

The marines had descended into silence, each lost in their own thoughts as they moved through the city. Soon they reached the rally

point and found that for each of the seven Reaper platoons there were no less than two full platoons of bonded cor-sec troopers who would serve as additional combat support.

Samuel didn't like the look of most of them. To his eyes they seemed more like jumped up security guards than soldiers. The Bosses, including the dour new Boss Aiken, who had replaced Mag, seemed equally unimpressed.

What did catch everyone's eyes though, were the seven costumed and tattooed warriors who stood at an uneasy distance from the cor-sec platoons. Each of the seven individuals couldn't have been more different from the next, save for the eight-pointed star over a crown tattoo on the right sides of their faces.

They were dressed in rags, though much of the material was festooned with a dizzying assortment of bones, bullet casings, coins, beads, and other items to numerous to catalog.

The longer Samuel looked at them the more he became convinced that the items must be trophies, tokens to commemorate one deed or another. It sounded good in his head and helped him make sense of it all. The people of Grotto were plain folk, and typically did not make such a show of themselves.

The gangers bristled with a multitude of weapons, armed with every imaginable type of shotgun, pistol, spear, knife and axe. Their hair styles were equally bizarre, a riot of strange colors and cuts that reminded him of the revel bands back on Baen who played in illegal underground clubs and screeched anti-Grotto propaganda at the audience over the grating sound of guitars, synths, and drums. He'd never cared for the music, though Sura had insisted that it was important to see a few shows.

Once he'd joined the Reapers that had stopped. Now that his movements were tracked much more closely as a soldier he couldn't afford to be caught involved in such things.

Still, like those revel bands, the same defiance and fierce individualism, was reflected here by these downspire gangers.

What Samuel couldn't understand was why in the world nobody was shooting at them. The gangers were the very enemy the Reapers had been sent to eliminate. As the marine looked around he saw that he wasn't the only one confused by their presence, and it was only the lack of response from the surly cor-sec troopers that stayed his hand.

"Boss?" asked Spencer from his perch on the transport as he flexed his hand on his rifle's handle, "Are those what I think they are?"

"That's right, Green. Bought and paid for with food, fresh water and our promise to wipe out every rival gang they've ever had a grudge against," answered Boss Ulanti as she stood and shoulder

checked Spencer in a manner that had to have been the closest thing to affection any of the marines had seen her display, “Those gangers are the Rotted Kings, our local guides.”

4. DOWNSPIRE

As bullets chewed up the wooden planking that comprised the makeshift low tide dock, sending swarms of splinters flying in all directions, the salvage marine was thankful for his battle armor.

Samuel sprinted across the dock and managed to stay a few steps ahead of the machine gunner who was tracking him with deadly fire.

The gunner was firing a weapon that seemed to have been fabricated entirely out of spare parts. The report and muzzle flash were different with each round, which indicated homemade ammunition as well.

Samuel leapt behind a rusted and pockmarked metal pylon just as the gunner's aim caught up with him. The shots rattled the pylon so hard that a cloud of rust and who knew what else cascaded down onto the marine.

His body was encased in the standard Reaper combat armor, though for their mission into downspire each soldier had been issued 'tunnel webbing', a series of specialized coverings for the segments of their armor. The webbing resembled matte black spider silk draped in a lattice pattern across each section of Samuel's armor. Its purpose was to wick away toxins, chemicals and a variety of other harmful substances that might be suspended in the various liquids a soldier was likely to encounter downspire. The armor appeared to now have glossy scales or insect shells layered over it, giving him and the other Reapers a somewhat more menacing appearance, although nothing that the marines were sporting could equal the eye-catching, mismatched costumes and markings of the downspire gangers.

It had been a hard fight just to get this far into District 12's downspire region. It was being ferociously held by the Haggard Sons, a powerful clan of gangers that had dominated these sewage tunnels for generations.

Samuel dared to pop out from behind the pylon long enough to fire several rounds into the murky half-light of the sewage channel, and then cursed at himself for not using his low-light scope to ensure that he'd actually hit anything. Then again, thought Samuel, toggling the sight on his combat rifle, pausing to aim would have given the gunner plenty of time to peg him. The gunner was good; Samuel had to give him that, considering how the last few minutes had unfolded.

Samuel looked back the way he'd come and saw the bullet-riddled corpses of two cor-sec troopers laying mangled and bloody on the planks of the dock.

It had all happened so fast. He couldn't be sure, but Samuel thought it likely that the body of a third trooper was even now

floating in the water on the other side of the dock. The rest of Squad Aiken, as they were now called, looked to be in stout cover behind a series of pylons supporting the spires above and the handful of portable flak-boards they had lugged down here with them.

The Reapers were accompanied by two cor-sec platoons, just over thirty men and women, all armed with standard combat rifles and shotguns. For better or worse, the gunner was focusing his attention on Samuel, though he was strafing the squad's position every few seconds just to keep them squatting in place. Whoever this ganger was, he certainly knew how to properly use a heavy weapon to control the battlefield, Samuel thought as he swept the area with his eyes in search of some way to strike back without being torn to pieces.

Samuel took in his surroundings with a more critical eye, noting the multitudes of bullet holes in the concrete walls opposite of the mouth of the sewage channel. Most of them were old, some even had mold growing out of them or brackish fluids leaking from them as the environment sought to fill any available dark crevice with some form of corruption or growth.

That was the way of things in downspire, Samuel had come to learn over the last few weeks. Since most of the bullet holes were old, Samuel began to realize why the dock was made out of ramshackle wood and barely held together.

The Haggard Sons had been holding this ground for years, perhaps even decades, as a natural choke point. Any enemy element, regardless of size, was architecturally forced to push through the bulkhead just behind Squad Aiken's current position. Clearly, the gangers had engaged enemies numerous times here, and would simply re-build their dock whenever it had taken too much damage to function. Samuel glanced one last time at the bodies of the cor-sec troopers. He realized with begrudging respect that it was actually the gangers enemies that would be bringing the fresh ammunition and weapons into the jaws of this trap to replenish what the gunner would have exhausted cutting them down. It had a brutal simplicity to it, a low cunning that Samuel had to admire.

The marine could see several more gangers clinging to the walls as they moved to flank the Reaper position. Samuel's observations were cut short as Boss Aiken's voice sounded in his ear piece.

"Okay, soldiers, this half-life scum isn't going to hold us back any longer. Command has us on a specific timetable and we need to stick with it," Boss Aiken growled into the ears of the squad as they hid behind their various points of cover.

"Boss, I can see gangers moving into position, on your left flank," interrupted Samuel, just before more bullets tore into the wood around his legs, pushing him into an awkward position as he

attempted to keep himself secure behind the pylon, “They’ve got cloaks that look like the concrete, I count four but it’s tough to be sure, could be more.”

“Copy that, Prybar, I see them,” said Patrick Baen. Return fire soon spit out from behind one of the flak boards as the soldier squeezed the trigger.

One of the gangers fell away from the wall in a bloody spray, splashing into the foul liquid lake that took up most of the space in the large concrete chamber. More of the gangers began shooting and in seconds the chamber was a deafening cacophony of small arms fire as the two forces engaged.

The Reapers and cor-sec troopers were only too glad to have an enemy that they could see. The machine gunner on his boat was too far in the shadows for them to get a bead on, even with their half-light scopes. Something about the air quality in downspire played havoc with most of the more sophisticated gear, and more often than not the Reapers and cor-sec troopers relied on their old fashioned iron sights.

The gunner responded to the firefight by raking his weapon across the Reaper position. Samuel couldn’t see clearly who got hit, but he knew that several bodies jerked backwards and lay still on the ground.

“They want this beachhead secured and ready to receive work crews as soon as possible. I want volunteers!” Boss Aiken barked into his com, obviously uncaring about how many died needlessly as long as he attained his objective.

Boss Aiken was a transfer from the Bagrid Gamma Reaper fleet, a solar system near the Baen worlds, where deep core mining was the primary operation.

In Samuel’s opinion, Aiken’s character and personality had all of the subtlety and imagination of a stereotypical mining manager. He did not see his soldiers as people, more as resources to be exploited in the service of the Bottom Line. While Samuel knew this was indeed true, Boss Aiken all but rubbed their faces in it. At least Boss Marsters and Ulanti did their best to treat the Reapers like human beings. Their orders were sometimes difficult and brutal, but their callous demeanors were balanced by the honor and courage that they did their best to instill by example.

With Boss Taggart gone and Wynn Marsters being of the opinion that no soldier in Mag’s squad was ready for command, the Reaper command had transferred Aiken over to Tango Platoon. Talk around the mess hall was that Aiken had lost both of his former squads in the line of duty. Samuel put little faith in such rumors, but his experience with the turbines on Tetra Prime had illustrated to him the kind of military operation Grotto truly ran.

Perhaps all Bosses in the Bagrid Gamma fleet led the same way Aiken did, but this was a Baen Reaper platoon. Samuel hoped that Boss Marsters would take notice of how poorly Aiken ran the squad and remove him from command before anyone was needlessly killed.

The problem was that Squad Aiken hadn't been in contact with the rest of Tango Platoon for nearly a week now as they moved deeper and deeper into the bowels of District 12.

Samuel knew that if he didn't make a bold move Boss Aiken would end up doing something stupid like ordering his soldiers to move up and re-take the dock, despite the heavy casualties that such a tactic would incur.

Sighing and rolling, his eyes, the marine took advantage of brief shift in the gunner's attention and rolled off of the dock and into the disgusting lake.

Samuel's heavy armor carried him to the bottom of the lake, which was, thankfully, only seven or so feet deep. His helmet's ocular sensors did their best to feed his eyes a modicum of vision in the murky water but it was still like looking through greenish brown clouds.

He had known from the briefings and his own experiences over the last several weeks that most of the bodies of "water" here were only a few feet deep, having been created by leaks or simple condensation and were contained within pre-designed chambers like the one he now stood inside.

This was a curious detail about sewer warfare that Samuel had learned from one of their ganger escorts, Vol, who was currently shouting boasts and cursing at the top of his lungs while shooting his heavy pistol at the enemy gangers.

Samuel smiled as he waded through the water, thinking that if that crazy ganger's voice carried to his ears underwater, then it must be as loud as the guns above the water line.

The marine was forced to activate an orange light-stick as he worked his way through the water, knowing even as he did it, that it was going to give away his position. He had little choice in the matter. The murky lake was filled with heaps of refuse; some of it jagged metal, though most of it was mounds of organic matter, likely mold or some kind of toxic algae bloom. Regardless, Samuel had little interest in being impaled or otherwise entangled.

The marine knew that his only chance was to press forward and hope that the firefight raging above would keep the gunner occupied. Here and there errant rounds zipped through the liquid, most likely having ricocheted off of some part of the chamber.

Ahead, just at the outer range of his light stick, he saw movement under the surface. Samuel's mouth went dry and he had a nauseous

feeling deep in the pit of his stomach. Something was moving in on his position, and even though he hadn't gotten a clear view of it, the primitive parts of his brain were screaming at him to flee.

Samuel had battled many deeply mutated and twisted human beings, but as he watched the slithering shadow move towards him in the half-light he knew that this was a true monster.

No human hybrid DNA was left in whatever crept through the foul lake and it was unlikely there had ever been. This abomination, whatever it was, had evolved within the cauldron of toxic waste and discarded refuse and he was the interloper in its domain.

Samuel still couldn't make out exactly what it was, so despite the risk of alerting the gunner above he flicked on his gun-light just as the thing crossed between two heaps of underwater refuse that lay ahead of him.

Despite the light hitting the beast directly, Samuel's brain could only detect a mass of undulating, rubbery, pink flesh. Primal instinct took over and he instantly toggled his weapon over to full-auto, squeezing the trigger without regard for the danger of discovery. His brain screamed at him that whatever this was must die, lest it kill him, eat him, or perhaps even lay eggs in his rotting flesh.

Samuel was yelling without realizing it, and continued to fire as his light tracked the nightmarish creature. He could see bright yellow liquid clouding in front of him from multiple ragged holes in the creature's tentacled body.

His magazine clicked empty as the beast fled deeper into the darkness of the chamber, well out of the range of his lights. Samuel knew with certainty he'd wounded it, perhaps even mortally, but knew just as certainly that his position had been exposed to the gunner above.

Confirming his thoughts, a salvo of bullets streaked through the water. They would have punched several holes in him had Samuel not immediately thrown himself to the side, simultaneously shutting off his gun-light and dropping the light stick as he re-loaded. Samuel knew he was taking a huge risk moving so quickly through the murky darkness but it had to be done.

Samuel found that if he kept his eyes upwards he could just make out the intermittent muzzle flashes of the machine gun as it alternated between firing into the water around it and then toward the docks.

As he moved, the marine could see that the gunner was standing on some of some kind of grate. He decided this was as good a vantage point as he was going to get. Toggling his combat rifle back to semi-automatic, he began firing rounds up through the grate.

The marine expected many of his shots to be stopped or deflected by the grating, but as he had hoped, several seemed to find their mark

and a body splashed into the water above him.

As Samuel moved aside to avoid the sinking corpse, several fleshy tentacles erupted from the darkness to attack him. They fastened to his armor with unbelievable strength using dozens of tiny suckers on the bottom side of the tentacle. In the half-light, Samuel could see that several tentacles had also attached themselves to the corpse. Despite his shock, he realized that if he did not disable that gun his comrades would be in continued peril as more hostiles rushed to operate the weapon, so he held his ground. Samuel felt the tentacles slither around his legs and torso. Apparently the creature wasn't intelligent enough to differentiate between his weapon and his arm so his aim was unwavering.

Refusing to struggle against the tentacles wrapped around the rest of his body, he focused on his iron sights and the dim flash of the machine gun muzzle as he continued to fire. His clip went dry moments before more tentacles wrapped around his gun and wrenched it from his hands. The marine was very thankful in that moment, that command had deemed it allowable for those Reapers who wished to do so to carry their boarding knives.

Although meant for the close confines of shipboard combat, Samuel and many of the other marines had found them incredibly useful in downspire. Samuel slid his blade from the sheath on his forearm and began slashing wildly at the tentacles as they wrenched pieces of his armor loose from his body and began to ravage the thin body glove and flesh beneath.

Standard issue Reaper battle armor was cheap and overall considered low-tech when compared to the power suits of the Grotto Storm Troopers or elite mercenaries, though what it lacked in sophistication it made up for in overall stoutness.

When it came to small arms fire the armor would deflect all but the most precise or direct shots, however, no Grotto engineer had ever intended to protect the soldiers from an enemy attempting to tear the armor away. Samuel felt as if he were some crustacean being assaulted by the most macabre of cephalopods. In this case, reality was much more horrifying than anything his imagination could have conjured.

Now that the gun above wasn't providing even temporary illumination, Samuel was unable to see much of anything. Even if he'd been able to get a light-stick ignited all he would have seen would be the billowing clouds of the creature's yellow blood mixing with smaller clouds of his own red blood as he and the creature tore into each other.

Samuel was unsure how long he'd been unconscious, though he

knew it could only have been a few seconds. He was in pitch darkness and could still feel that he was underwater through the holes in his suit. It was the thought of what nasty microbes and toxic materials that might be seeping into his body that galvanized him to action. The marine ignited several light-sticks one after the other and let them fall around him to illuminate several meters of submerged chamber.

At his feet Samuel could see the body of the ganger he'd shot slowly being sucked down into the thick muck that covered the chamber floor. There were chunks of tentacle everywhere, all slowly sinking down to join the ganger. Whether he'd killed the creature or not, Samuel couldn't tell, but it had to be one tough monster to survive all the bullets and severed tentacles. He hoped it had crawled back to whatever hellhole it called home and died of its wounds. He couldn't move much and was relieved when he saw the wake and shadow of a skiff making its way over to him from the grating area where the machine gun used to be.

Someone from the skiff lowered a gaff pole into the liquid and friend or foe, Samuel decided he'd rather be out of this murky mess than in it, regardless of who might be hauling him up.

"Prybar, you are one unkillable son of a bitch!" shouted Patrick as he hefted the marine's armored bulk onto the small skiff.

Samuel struggled to find a witty response, though was simply too spent to vocalize much beyond a weak smile and a groan as his fellow marine helped him take off his helmet. Samuel's armor was pitted and slimy from the toxic water, and the marine could already see the flesh of his wounds turning a sickly shade of white and green. Patrick followed his gaze and nodded as the skiff pilot; a marine recruit that Samuel seemed to recall was named Holland, cranked the motor and headed back to the shattered dock.

"We got lucky, old pal, if you hadn't knocked out that shooter's nest we would have been fragged," Patrick said as he opened the squad med-kit and began dosing Samuel with vial after vial of antibiotics, anti-inflammatories and a few painkillers, "Those gangers with the big gun and those wall crawlers had us so busy we didn't notice their backup."

"There were four small access tunnels that they'd covered up with canvas painted to look like the walls," explained Holland as he moved them closer to shore, taking care not to move too quickly to avoid hitting any partially submerged scrap metal. "Before we knew it, dozens of those hive scum are charging at us with everything from axes to clubs."

"The others?" asked Samuel in a voice thick with painkillers as he struggled to maintain consciousness, "Are they…"

"Kade did just fine. Takeda got clipped early in the shootout, but

we held our own, and no fatalities." Patrick grinned as he patted Samuel's shoulder before his face turned sour and he looked back at the oncoming docks, "Cor-sec got chewed to pieces though, sixty-percent casualties. Between us three, I don't think cor-sec had any business being down here."

"Agreed. It's like they're just everyday civilians who happen to have a gun and a badge and think that makes them hardcore enough for this kind of stuff," grumbled Holland as the skiff reached the last section of the dock that was useable as a mooring. "They're good at pushing around working stiffs, but these downspire gangers are out of their league."

"Cor-sec is bringing up reinforcements to fortify this area so they can prep it as a salvage hub," Patrick observed as he and Holland helped Samuel stagger off of the skiff and across the dock towards the beachhead.

"So, we'll be moving on down the line, eh?" mumbled Samuel as his comrades lay him down on a stretcher next to Ben, who sat upright against a bullet-riddled flak board with his left arm in a pressure sleeve.

"Yeah, we're getting rotated to that FOB we built in the metro hub two levels up for a few days of R & R while command decides which pit of hell they want us to clean out next," laughed Ben as he looked over Samuel's various wounds, "But I'm thinking you're probably going to sleep through most of that."

Samuel didn't answer, the painkillers finally wrapping him in their warm embrace and ferrying him into a blank numbness, far from any tentacles or foul lakes.

5. FOB SPECTER

District 12 was one of the many uniform hab-blocks that circled the outer ring of the Vorhold spire city, which provided housing for commuters who worked at the various industrial complexes that comprised the inner circle of the spire.

Vorhold, like most other spire cities, was constructed like a giant teardrop, frozen upon impact with solid ground. The base of it was circular, made up of four concentric urban circles, with the buildings of each circle rising higher and higher towards the center. At the exact apex of the city was a gigantic spire, hence the name of the urban planning style across mapped space, where management and the elites worked and played. Most spire cities in mapped space were exceptionally old, and generally considered an archaic way of designing cities, as it created a physical and ever-present reminder for anyone in the city as to who held the power and who did not.

Spire cities were relics of a more brutal age, when the mega-corporations were still struggling to dominate their citizenry in a somewhat overt manner.

The general idea was that by witnessing the lavish lifestyles of the elites and living in the looming shadow of their mighty spires, the common citizenry would keep their heads down, keep their mouths shut, and work harder to achieve that distant dream.

While there were plenty of corporate worlds that contained spire cities, most of them, like Vorhold, were shadows of what they once were. They had been allowed to slowly degrade as more and more elites simply moved off world to distant resort planets or paradise ships, allowing their spires to be bought up by what passed for the middle class in their respective corporate cultures.

Most corporations in the modern age had realized that flaunting the wealth and power of the elites generated more resentment and dissent than it inspired compliance and increased productivity. The elites lived a life generally removed from the common citizenry, who now labored towards simpler goals.

Vorhold had been one of the last true spire cities. The elites of Vorhold Ventures had gambled the majority of their vast fortunes on a number of faulty investments and speculations, rapidly finding themselves with tremendous debts. Vorhold corporate culture was no different, in one respect, from the rest of the mega-corps. Common citizens were prevented by regulation and taxation from owning much in the way of private property. Their homes, vehicles, devices, services, and medical devices were all leased from their feudal corporate masters. Everything, even the grimy depths of downspire

and the abyss of deepspire, were owned, according to the documentation, by Vorhold Ventures.

When the Vorhold elites began to fall behind on their debt repayments, many of the creditor corporations formed an alliance and waged a devastating economic war against Vorhold Ventures. Battle fleets created pickets to police the shipping lanes and enforce severe trade embargoes while they covertly encouraged and perhaps, even bribed Red List pirate ships to prey upon the handful of relief ships and smugglers who attempted to use the alternate routes.

It did not take long for Vorhold Ventures to accept defeat and begin selling off assets to cover the debts. The grim truth behind corporate culture was revealed as the elites bailed themselves out at the expense of the common citizens upon whose shoulders they had risen in the first place.

Grotto Corporation's voracious appetite for raw materials was notorious throughout mapped space and they seized the opportunity Vorhold presented with savage intensity. Grotto Corporation was not a company that thrived on innovation, or speculation, but upon hard assets. This meant that Grotto rarely had the kind of liquid assets that many of the other mega- corporations held, though it was by far one of the most robust companies in existence.

Payment by Grotto to the elites of Vorhold was in the form of money, ships, and properties off world. The elites then turned and liquidated all of those hard assets in a matter of months, which allowed them to pay off their debts and leave Vorhold to its new master, Grotto Corporation.

With little more than a few boardroom meetings and some signatures, the entire future of the spire city and its entire population was sold off. The elites abandoned the city to take early retirement elsewhere while the common people and even the militant cor-sec awaited their fate.

Grotto Corporation now owned everything in the spire city, from the tallest building to the lowest sewage tunnel, and it meant to get a return on its investment. The entire city was to be depopulated, demolished, and what did not get re-used elsewhere in the Grotto empire would be sold as scrap.

The forward operations base was by no means comfortable, though when compared to the rotten shadows of the downspire sprawl that surrounded it, most of the soldiers stationed there had come to consider it rather pleasant. In the ledgers of Reaper Command, which led the joint action between the former cor-sec troops and the salvage marines, the FOB was logged as FOB D12/2. However, for the locals to whom this was now a home away from home, it was Specter.

Once the joint forces cleared the metro hub beneath District 12

they had found themselves inundated with refugees from downspire. All but the most ferocious and stubborn of the gangers and clansmen had been making their way upwards since news of the city's takeover. Though cor-sec had warned Reaper Command that the population of downspire was unknown, no one was ready for just how many thousands had come streaming up from the depths all over the spire city.

They were the shadow population of the spire. Castaways from the corporate society that had, one way or the other, left them so desperate that they sought the underworld. To the Reapers, the refugees had seemed like ghosts, mere hollowed out shells of who they had once been. Life in downspire was hard, violent, and usually short.

Perhaps, thought Samuel, as he looked up from his drink to take in the crowded squalor of the base, this was why the slang name for the base had come so naturally. To walk the streets of District 12 one would never notice that just a few clicks downwards there was another world rotting beneath one's feet.

Samuel sat alone, as had been his custom for the last two weeks, sipping his one drink before retiring to his bunk for the evening sleep cycle. With no natural light present, the Reapers had to rely on their devices to give them any sense of time. The first week of R & R had been scheduled, and that had passed Samuel by in a blurred cycle of fever and medication as his body fought against the myriad of infections he'd picked up while fighting in the murky soup of the lake.

The second week came when the last of the Haggard Sons gangers overwhelmed a cor-sec defense unit and detonated a suicide bomb that collapsed a critical tunnel system nearby. The joint forces had intended to use those tunnels to transport all of the heavy equipment that would eventually be needed to cut into the multitudes of pylons that supported the massive spire city from far below.

The Reapers were pulled from the frontline and stationed at the forward operations base. Samuel knew that most of the Reapers didn't mind, as they were still getting their hazard rates whether they were being shot at or not. For better or worse the marines had time to relax, though for Samuel that came with some difficulty given the situation in upspire. The marine sipped his drink and wondered just what sort of nightmare was unfolding above him.

"Hey, Prybar, you've got that far away look in your eyes," said Harold joked as he slapped Samuel's back and joined him at the makeshift bar, little more than a plank of wood nailed across two fifty gallon barrels covered with a tarp, "Thinking about home, eh?"

"Beats the alternative," answered Samuel, as he nodded at a pair of children taking turns dipping their fingers into what looked to be the discarded remnants of an MRE package.

“I can’t watch that,” groaned Harold, turning away, “Me, Jada, and Virginia gave all our extras out when Boss Marsters wasn’t looking. I’m going hungry as it is.”

“A round for both my friends here!” shouted Ben to the withered old woman who tended the bar as he joined the pair of Reapers.

“You barter by the drink boy, this is downspire,” scoffed the old woman as she made little effort to show her hand fingering the stubby pistol holstered on her hip, “I don’t care if you’re Executive Lord Vorhold hisself.”

“Easy, lady, I didn’t come empty handed,” Ben smiled, undaunted by the woman’s hostility. “I brought two size beta charge bricks and a full toiletry kit that ought to buy us the whole damn bottle.”

“On the barrelhead and we’ll see,” she spit, but already her expression was softening, and soon it became a greedy smile as Ben laid the promised loot before her.

The barkeep poured out four shots of the amber liquid into cups of hammered metal and then passed one to each of the men.

Samuel had taken a liking to the local liquor, though he had specifically avoided asking what was in it or how it was made, as this was indeed downspire. Samuel had found it quite fascinating just how much ingenuity was on display in this subterranean world. They had a use for everything, a skilled scavenger was held in high esteem indeed.

“Drink up, Reapers, the night is young,” boasted Ben as he raised his drink in toast to the other two soldiers, each who met his cup with their own in a soft clunk.

“One for the Stalker in the Dark,” said the old woman in a quiet voice, surprising the marines by clinking her own drink against theirs before hurling the liquid over her shoulder. Ben and Harold looked at her with abject confusion at the waste of good booze.

“I’ve seen others here say the same thing before pushing tidbits of food away,” Samuel remarked, resting his elbows on the bar. He pointed at the two children, “Even starving kids do it. What does it mean?”

“It keeps…*them*… from getting too hungry or too thirsty,” growled the barkeep as she lined up three more rounds of the liquid, “Its bad luck to talk too much about it. Now drink your drinks and shut up.”

“Let it go, Samuel,” Ben insisted before he swallowed his drink. “We have one night cycle left before we have to put our boots on.”

“What did you hear?” Harold asked.

“Bianca and Patrick overheard Boss Aiken arguing with the quartermaster.” As if the thought of the Boss being angry somehow lightened his mood, Ben grinned.

“There are apparently welding crews coming over from our support cadre, they’ve been pulled from upspire salvage ops and re-tasked to accompany us further down.”

“Ah, they must have managed to find alternate routes into deepspire,” said Samuel after pondering it for a moment, taking a sip from his drink.

“Why can’t we just drill right through the base of the spire itself?” Harold argued, as if the other two soldiers were management. “We’ve been pushing through District 12’s downspire for weeks and I don’t see how that’s a better use of resources.”

“Likely the surveyors and engineers reviewed the architectural data and determined it to be more profitable to send Reapers the long way in on foot than to drill or blast down to deepspire,” Samuel replied as he finished his drink and stood up from the table, “It’s just like back on Tetra Prime, they’ll shove us through the meat grinder if that means the balance sheet looks better when the mission is done.”

“City demo is complicated stuff, could be that some of the structures down there are so old that nobody really remembers how or why upspire doesn’t just collapse, especially considering that all of the industry is concentrated right there at the base of the spire,” mused Ben.

“You guys talk shop even when we’re trying to get a load on,” grumbled Harold, as he shoved the pair of friends ahead of him and deeper into the refugee sprawl of FOB Specter’s makeshift red light district, “Let’s go find Vol and he’ll show us where the real party is.”

6. HARD MEAT

Samuel and the rest of the Reapers in the squad going into deepspire were gathered around the hole that was the entrance giving their repelling gear and weapons a final check.

“Reekertown,” Boss Marsters stated flatly, staring down into the blackness.

“Last stop where you’re likely to meet anything walking on two legs you’d want to call a man,” said Vol in a tone that bespoke both a sense of pride and dreadful certainty, almost as if the ganger was pleased about the fact that he was going down there despite his fear. Vol’s words hung in the air for a few moments as the Reapers considered them.

Samuel silently looked Vol up and down, really seeing the man for the first time.

Though technically a civilian by military standards, Vol was certainly a veteran, and his life as a ganger was displayed in his very dress and manner. The man was covered in homemade tattoos, most of them a variety of hash marks and repeating symbols that seemed to tell a story, even if in a language that only other gangers would understand. No doubt they were the story of his life, a record of his deeds, and when combined with the various scars visible on the man’s face, arms, and neck, his life had been quite full.

Vol was shorter than most of the marines, perhaps the result of malnourishment as much as genetics, and though his body was thick with corded muscle, the man’s face betrayed his chronological youth. Underneath the patchwork armor, the tattoos, scars, and general downspire filth, Samuel realized that Vol was in his late twenties at the oldest.

“Detailed recordings of the Rotted King’s intelligence briefing was made available to squad leaders prior to deployment, therefore, we have an adequate appreciation for the dangers ahead. With respect, let’s just get on with it shall we?” Boss Aiken snapped as he released the catch on his repelling line and disappeared into the darkness below.

“Hey, Boss,” Vol said as he looked gravely at his own reflection in Boss Marster’s Reaper helmet, “Them Reekers is hard meat, we better step light and bang it for keeps.”

“Understood,” nodded Boss Marsters as he leaned backwards over the edge of the vertical concrete tunnel, “Tillman, Hyst, you two send Vol down then tie off this line. I want it set in case we need a hasty retreat.”

With that, Boss Marsters kicked off and released the catch on his

repel line to descend. Not long after Vol, Samuel, and Virginia made their landing and rushed to catch up with the platoon as it moved out. The Reapers moved with a purpose while still doing their best to keep the noise signature as minimal as possible despite their bulky combat armor and weapons.

Vol moved easily and quietly among the ranks, taking point as he led them through the labyrinth of tunnels. The only illumination came from the Reapers gun-lights and muted lightsticks, but the ganger seemed to move more by touch and sound than he did sight.

It wasn't long before Vol started using the iridescent paint that Boss Ulanti had scored for him from the quartermaster in order to mark traps and it was a most useful tool.

Vol silently pointed out a series of graffiti symbols painted on the wall, in what substance Samuel couldn't tell, though it had to be blood or excrement considering the smell. They had finally entered Reeker territory, and once they crossed the threshold of those gang signs there was a cleverly disguised trap nearly every thirty meters. Most of them were spring-loaded projectiles made out of scrap metal. It was unlikely they would have been strong enough to penetrate the marine combat plate, but none of the Reapers wanted to test the potency of their armor against them.

It was growing more and more difficult for the on-board filters in the marine's helmets to scrub the foul stench that began to overwhelm the location. It was little wonder, thought Samuel, using his gun-light to illuminate passageways and dark corners as the platoon moved through the deadly gloom, that they were called Reekers.

According to the terse brief given by Boss Marsters to the platoon before deploying from FOB Specter, this Reekertown had been built in and around the central sewage hub of the spire itself. While it was not the Basin, it was nestled adjacent to the Alpha Target and once cleared of hostiles would provide the Reapers with an ideal staging area.

Using the stories and crude drawings of the Rotted Kings gangers the engineer corps aboard the tug had extrapolated that one of three primary entries into the Basin was located within the settlement.

The plan was for Tango Platoon to make a covert approach from within the tunnel system, relying upon their ganger guide to prevent them from getting lost and ending up wandering downspire. The cor-sec forces, who numbered nearly seventy-five shooters thanks to the troop surge ordered by Reaper Command several days earlier, was supposedly going to drill through from the top down.

Where they kept finding more cor-sec troopers was beyond Samuel. As he'd taken a look at them in FOB Specter as they arrived on the crude trams, he was skeptical that any of them had more than a

few days of training. More than likely they were freshly bonded into Grotto and willing to accept combat duty in exchange for smaller bonds.

Samuel supposed that it was a sound plan, if one were to consider the lives of the cor-sec troopers to be basically expendable. No doubt they were cheap shooters in the eyes of Grotto Corporation, he thought grimly as he made his way through the half-light, and management would consider them an acceptable loss so long as the objective was taken.

The Reapers were to launch a lighting assault on the settlement, using their supposedly superior firepower and advanced training to throw the Reeker defenses into abject chaos. This would, theoretically, prevent them from mounting a counter-attack on the cor-sec forces who would pour in from the drill chutes. It was a full scale shock and awe strategy, and Samuel hoped, for the sake of the untested cor-sec recruits, that it worked.

Samuel's hopes were dashed as the sound of gunfire began to echo through the tunnels. Whatever was going on, it sounded like a war had broken out somewhere in the darkness. It was far too distant to be anyone inside the tunnel system with them, and the marines began to look at each other in confusion. Boss Ulanti and Boss Marsters traded a grimace. Ulanti turned to the platoon.

"The plan is humped," she said matter-of-factly. "Reaper support must have gotten greedy with the drill and they're already through."

"What we're hearing is cor-sec getting its ass handed to it," Ben growled as he shook the dripping sewage off of his heavy machine gun. "What's the play, Boss?"

"We move as fast as we can through the traps and then we engage," said Boss Marsters as he nodded to Vol, who smiled wickedly before he and the platoon leader began rushing through the tunnel.

"So much for making plans," laughed George Tuck as he let out an exaggerated sigh, falling in step with the rest of the marines as they ran down the tunnel towards the sound of gunfire.

Samuel was near the back of the column of marines as they jostled to push through the small tunnel exit and into the chaotic firefight below. As Samuel finally squeezed his bulky armored frame through the passage he got his first full view of Reekertown and the bloodbath that was unfolding within.

The settlement wasn't so much a coherent series of buildings as it was a tangled mess of gangplanks, netting walls, zip-lines, and scaffolding. There were buildings of all shapes and sizes, uniform only in that they were all haphazardly built out of scraps. What it lacked in planning it certainly made up for in size, as the settlement easily spanned twice the distance of FOB Specter, which had, until that

moment, been the most spacious place Samuel had seen in this cramped and murky underworld.

Tango Platoon had spread out as more marines followed Boss Marsters and Vol through the opening, but there was little room for large squad movements.

“Ulanti, Marr, Tillman, find the Basin hatch and secure it!” came Boss Marster’s iron edged voice through the platoon’s com-bead as he raised his rifle to his shoulder and squeezed off a three round burst. “Tuck, holster your sidearm and get that flamer spitting, the rest of you pair off and engage at will.”

The platoon erupted into action as the veterans surged forward, dragging the newer members of the platoon along in their wake.

Spencer smacked his armored fist onto Samuel’s shoulder plate and as quick as that the two of them broke away from the opening and sprinted towards a mounted ladder leading down. Spencer raised his rifle and began laying down cover fire as Samuel ignored the rungs and allowed his weight to carry him swiftly down a lengthy drop before his boots hit the metal grating below. The marine shouldered his rifle and began scanning for enemies.

All around them the settlement was quaking with movement as the Reekers reacted to the premature cor-sec attack. From his perch, which was still easily four stories above the watery floor of the gigantic hub chamber, Samuel could see the evidence of cor-sec’s ill-fated assault.

From his vantage point it looked as if the drillers had chewed right through the upper decks, just as planned, and dropped the assault chutes. Samuel had only used the chutes during Reaper basic, and honestly, he was thankful that they’d never found occasion to deploy them during his years on the payroll.

The assault chutes were rapid-inflate, hard rubber slides, much like those sometimes used as emergency escape devices in large factories. With a few modifications in the bullet resistant polymers coating the chute, the Reapers were, in theory, able to use them as a way of delivering foot soldiers into close quarters combat zones that were otherwise impassable or less than ideal for traditional repel lines.

For better or worse, Samuel had always been in situations where there were an abundance of stairs, footholds, or pick points for repel lines, not to mention firefights in zero gravity.

The one day they trained on chutes in basic, Samuel had decided the devices had earned their nickname of ‘suicide slides’. Mag had postulated that whatever contractor had been pitching these chutes to Reaper Command must have made quite the demonstration.

The general idea was that the marines were intended to be shooting at the enemy during their descent, adding to the shock effect

of the tactic. Unfortunately, the uncontrollable velocity that a fully armored Reaper achieved if he or she descended more than a few meters was sufficient to dump them into the combat zone in a crumpled heap at least thirty percent of the time. Landing on your back or crashing face first into a firefight was no way to survive said fight. Unsurprisingly, most Reaper leaders avoided the chutes when there was even a slim possibility of an alternative method.

Samuel was positive that the cor-sec leadership was either not informed or didn't care, as they had ordered their seventy five trooper unit to drop right into the center of hostile territory from nearly fifty meters.

Samuel could see a small pile of cor-sec trooper corpses, perhaps as many as two dozen, at the base of the chutes, which were slick with gore.

From what he could see it looked as if the Reekers had heard the drill, which was no surprise, and had mustered around the chutes. When they deployed and the troopers began sliding down, *en masse,* it must have been one hell of a shooting gallery. The mounds of spent brass scattered across the ground under the entry point and around the bodies told the story of a massive firefight as the rest of the cor-sec troopers spread out into Reekertown.

It was difficult with all of the smoke and noise for Samuel to make any attempt at counting, but he did see that cor-sec's assault had left its mark on the enemy. Bullet holes peppered all of the ramshackle buildings around the entry point and Samuel could see more than a few ganger corpses draped across the railings, hanging from nets, or laying broken upon the same ground floor as the cor-sec casualties.

Spencer continued to lay down fire as Samuel scanned the scene. Once the marine's magazine clicked empty he caught Samuel's eye as he reloaded.

"I'm on you, Prybar," Spencer racked the slide of his combat rifle to chamber the first round. "Pick your battle."

"Cor-sec obviously got hammered when they dropped in. Considering their equipment and training, they're probably at seventy percent casualties at this point," Samuel said in disgust, "C'mon." He began sprinting down the gangplank towards a series of zip lines, most of which were cocked and ready, "Let's do what we can to keep the rest of them out of body bags."

The two marines reached the zip lines and in addition the hooks on the handlebars they also clipped on their own carabiners. Each of the marines had a small spool of high tension wire on their hip belts that fed to the bottom of the clips, as a failsafe in case the hooks gave out under their weight.

Nearly three stories down were several safety nets, but neither of

the marines had any interest in finding out if the nets would break their fall before hitting the fetid, oily looking water below.

Samuel wrapped one hand around the bars and flexed his arm to limber it up for what came next as he observed their future landing zone.

Presently, there were only a handful of corpses, presumably Reekers, from the look of them. The Reekers, or most of them that Samuel could see clearly in the semi-darkness of the settlement, were bald. Male and female alike had shaved pates and wore heavy raincoats, along with gloves, boots, and crude handmade re-breathers.

The Reaper helmet display showed low-level toxins in the air and water, both organic and inorganic in nature, which explained the Reeker 'uniforms'. The heavy jackets protected them from the continuous precipitation falling from above, most of it a combination of condensation from the handful of heated tunnels and the organic life in the gigantic chamber. However, some of the light rain was actually dripping from various micro-abrasions in the pipes and containers, all of which fell from above onto the settlement.

Perhaps the shaved heads were some manner of hygiene management in the dank environment, or it was possible that it was simply their hair falling out as a result of some substance in the area. The re-breathers no doubt aided the Reekers in daily existence since the stench would be overwhelming were one to remove their mask or helmet.

The marine could see that there was no obvious weapon type amongst the Reekers he could make out, much like the Haggard Sons; they fought with anything they could get their hands on. Such was life and war in downspire.

George Tuck was cutting loose with his flamer and already a huge swathe of the outer settlement, one story above them, was a smoking blaze. Samuel could see Boss Lucinda fighting her way through a series of shanties, barely stopping in her push towards the Basin hatch.

Samuel nodded at Spender and lifted his legs as he used his hand to throw the release on his zip line. As Samuel sailed across the open air space between the launch pad and the landing zone he could see that he was passing over a great interior lake of sewage three stories down. The settlement was built around it, with some buildings and platforms jutting out over the lake. A crisscross of zip lines and single file rope bridges also connected the circular settlement.

Most of the Reekers were too busy engaging the other marines or the remaining cor-sec troopers to spare him any attention, though as Samuel flew through the air he could feel and hear errant rounds whizzing past him.

Both Samuel and Spencer were holding onto the bars with one hand while they used the other to hold their combat rifles up so that they could fire from the hip as they approached the landing zone. While he had seen no sentries posted at the zone when he and Spencer first reached the launch pad, Samuel could see now that a lone Reeker had taken up position and was attempting to shoot them down.

The two marines bracketed the Reeker with semi-automatic fire and pushed him out into the open, where more rounds of continuous fire riddled him with holes as he flopped to the ground. Spencer held his rifle at the ready and continued to fire at another Reeker who appeared from a makeshift doorway while Samuel de-coupled himself from the line. The Reeker caught a round in the throat and fell back through the doorway choking.

Spencer only had two rounds left in his magazine, but he dared not lower his weapon until Samuel had de-coupled him and then re-loaded his own rifle. Once Samuel was locked and loaded, he stepped forward and covered the area while Spencer slapped in a fresh magazine. In a matter of seconds Spencer was ready and Samuel took the lead.

As the two marines plunged deeper into the more sturdy sections of the city they could tell that there was a raucous firefight going on ahead of them. The sporadic pot shot weapon signatures that filled the outer edges of the city, nearest the water, faded into background noise as the marines followed a trail of carnage towards the thunder of a more concentrated conflict.

The marines came to a gangplank dead end and were forced to go into the shanty buildings. Once they had passed through several buildings without having to force a door or break a lock they began to see that the Reekers lived a somewhat communal lifestyle. Samuel moved through what appeared to be a bedroom, though it was a wreck. Bullet holes had chewed up most of the room, and near the back of the room was the body of a cor-sec trooper.

Samuel was about to pull aside a ragged canvas drape when he was stopped short by the sound of voices in the shack beyond. The marines shared a glance and Spencer took up position on the other side of Samuel. Sliding his boarding knife free, Spencer used it to gently part a section of the canvas enough to partially see inside the room. He looked at Samuel and displayed three fingers for three shooters and then pointed at his knife, eliciting a nod from Samuel.

The Reapers slung their rifles and prepared their blades, then held their position until the sound of the Reekers guns going empty gave them their cue. Samuel flung aside the canvas to make room for Spencer, who rushed into the room, charging straight at the three Reekers inside.

Samuel followed closely and in seconds he was plunging his blade into the neck of a woman who had been attempting to chamber a shotgun round before he reached her. Spencer buried his knife to the hilt in the midsection of a man, with the tip angled upwards so that as the tall marine went from crouching to standing, the enemy's heart was pierced.

Unfortunately, the third Reeker had not paused to reload, but only stopped shooting long enough to clear a stove-pipe jam in his weapon. The rifle's action had clamped down on a spent shell's tip instead of ejecting it. The Reeker pointed his rifle at Spencer as the marine jerked his knife from the first enemy and turned to rush the shooter.

The Reeker reacted swiftly, chopping his hand over the action of the rifle, dislodging the spent casing and sending it bouncing off of Spencer's faceplate. The impact was nothing, but it distracted Spencer for a split-second which gave the shooter enough time to lift his boot and stomp kick the marine.

Spencer did not fall, but the force of the blow halted his charge and put him off balance. The Reeker fired his weapon at point blank range, his shots pounding into Spencer's armor mercilessly, dropping him to the ground in a shower of sparks, armor fragments, and blood.

Samuel shouted and slammed his boarding knife through the back of the Reeker's neck, the point emerging through his throat. The Reeker kept firing wildly as blood fountained from the wound. Samuel used the handle of his knife to pull the shooter to the side before letting his corpse fall to the ground.

On the other side of the shanty Samuel could see what appeared to be a sort of plaza filled with containers of every shape and size. Scattered among them was a group of roughly ten cor-sec troopers, most armed with pistols and shotguns, locked in a desperate shootout against Reekers who had taken up position all around them.

It was little wonder the cor-sec troopers were being mowed down, having had no training in general battle tactics, let alone urban warfare specifics. They had allowed themselves to be driven from their entry point to this kill zone by a superior force who knew the terrain.

This was Reekertown, and from what Samuel had seen as he and Spencer sought out the troopers, the marine knew that the Reeker defenders had been giving up ground to lure the cor-sec troopers deeper into the settlement. The cor-sec troopers had probably thought they were doing well, considering that there had been several Reeker corpses strewn about as the marines honed in on their position.

Spencer coughed up a mouthful of blood as he dragged himself over to the far wall. Once the Reekers realized enemies were flanking

them, they began to fire into the shack.

Samuel moved to the opposite wall, emptying an entire magazine in an attempt to suppress the Reeker shooters so that he and Spencer could recover. The marine knew that his comrade was wounded badly, but not so grievously that he couldn't be helped. Samuel crouched behind the splintered wood to reload and gave silent thanks for the metal sheeting that he could hear repelling many of the bullets sailing towards them.

"So much for flanking them unawares!" shouted Samuel as he reached for his med kit and then slid the compact little box across the dirty floor within Spencer's reach.

The wounded marine wasn't able to speak, though he did manage a weak thumbs up before cracking open the box and rummaging through it for the adrenal stims and nu-skin.

Samuel could see that even at close range, Spencer's stout combat armor had blunted much of the firepower. Though his chest plate was intact, his more articulated abdominal plates had been horribly mangled. The Reeker had been using what looked like a homemade weapon and likely hand-crafted ammunition, so at worst Samuel figured a handful of rounds had made it through. Then again, as he knew all too well, it took only one well placed bullet to bring a marine down, often for good.

Spencer's hands were shaking he worked quickly to hit himself with a series of injections meant to keep him going for a short while until the platoon medic arrived. Samuel had been the medic for several years, but since the recovery period after his spinal injury that duty had been shifted off to Holland, who had served admirably in keeping the bodies of Squad Aiken stitched together and the duty was never returned to Samuel.

Samuel's rifle scope was burdensome in such close quarters fighting, and he flipped it down so that he could rely on the iron sights. The marine toggled his rifle over to a single shot setting and began swiftly pelting multiple hostiles with rounds. He was firing mostly on instinct, allowing his training to take over and moving from target to target as quickly as he could. His accuracy was reduced and in just a few seconds he emptied the magazine.

He crouched back into cover, positive that he'd seen at least one or more of his targets jerk and react from hits. He was hoping that by making a big show he could draw fire away from the cor-sec troopers, and he prayed that they could take the initiative to seize the opportunity to counter-attack. At the least, he hoped they would manage to break out of their position and push through one of the weaker points in the enemy cordon and get into the relative safety of the narrow alleys and gangplank streets, well away from the kill zone

that the small plaza had become.

A new Reeker must have joined the fight, because hard rounds suddenly began to punch through the metal and wood walls of the shack. A few of the rounds struck Samuel in the thigh and shoulder as he reloaded, though they only served to knock him off his feet as his armor held. The slugs had been slowed by penetrating the wall, but the marine knew that it was only a matter of time before a lucky shot hit him just right and ended the fight for him.

Samuel risked taking a quick peek around the now nearly obliterated wall and saw a tall Reeker on a rooftop across the plaza reloading what appeared to be a homemade, heavy machine gun. The marine looked across the way at Spencer and saw that he had removed his helmet and his face was covered in blood. Samuel could see that despite the drugs, the marine was still coughing up a lot of the precious red and had removed his helmet to keep from swallowing it again accidently.

“Gunner on the roof, can you shoot?” asked Samuel, waving to get Spencer’s attention. The marine looked back at Samuel with glassy eyes and managed a weak nod. “Then you bracket him and I’ll drill him when he makes a run for it.”

Spencer groaned in pain as he used his legs to push himself up against the far wall enough that he could shove his helmet beneath his butt and as it as a seat. The improvised stool gave him just enough elevation that he was able to raise his rifle with his right hand and rest the barrel against the open window space. The marine spotted the gunner and began firing in his general direction.

Samuel did not expect Spencer to actually hit the gunner. He was hoping that the bracketing fire would push the Reeker from his position and give Samuel a clean shot. As it was, the gunner was mostly safe behind the cover of a heavy metal plate that was stopping much of Spencer’s fire. After a few seconds of sustained fire from Spencer, however, the gunner was either hit by one of the rounds that managed to penetrate the metal or finally lost his nerve. Either way, he rose from his position.

Samuel had guessed, wrongly, that the gunner was right handed and would rise on the left. Apparently, the gunner was left handed and he rose on the right with his weapon at ready.

The machine gun barked as it sent a salvo of projectiles ripping through the shack. One destroyed Spencer’s gun, the rest hammering his armor and sending the already wounded marine sprawling across the floor from the multiple impacts.

It took everything Samuel had not to drop his rifle and attempt to move Spencer away from the fighting, but he knew that the only way out of this fight was to push through. The marine looked down his v-

shaped iron sights and found the gunner as he toggled over to a three-round burst. He squeezed the trigger twice. The gunner jerked backwards as the first burst tore through his upper torso and then awkwardly toppled off of the roof and into the alley as at least one round from the second burst tore away his left knee.

The Reeker shooters that had previously been enjoying the shooting gallery of the kill zone were starting to fall back in the face of the increasingly stiff resistance from both cor-sec troopers and the two salvage marines.

The brief reprieve from the punishing crossfire had given the remaining cor-sec troopers a chance to break out of the kill zone and spread their numbers into several of the shacks and canvas covered structures around the plaza. The high pitch cracks of the cor-sec pistols and the stout barks of their shotguns added to the cacophony of Reekertown.

Samuel continued to use his iron sights to swiftly spread fire across the plaza, hitting any point he either saw or suspected a hostile shooter, until his magazine clicked dry once more. The marine swiftly reloaded and checked his mag pouches to discover that he was already down to his last two.

Close quarters urban warfare always consumed more ammunition, given how important suppressing and sustained fire was in advancing position, as well as bracketing fire for eliminating enemy snipers.

Samuel scampered across the shack over to Spencer's body, relieved to find that the marine still clung to life, however weakly.

Spencer's armor was cracked in several places and he was bleeding from multiple wounds. Samuel swiftly dosed the marine with more booster shots and affixed a quick pressure patch on all the most obvious wounds. There was little that Samuel could do without the squad kit, though he knew that Spencer would need a med-evac and soon if he was going to survive, even with the squad kit.

Samuel dragged Spencer's armored form into the furthest corner of the bullet-riddled shack and then stripped the marine of his remaining magazine. The shooting outside had died down so Samuel depressed the med-evac indicator tab on the side of Spencer's helmet before leaving the marine alone in the soft red glow of the tab.

Samuel emerged from the shack and was greeted by four cor-sec troopers, each of whom looked like they'd been handed a firearm only yesterday. Their faces had that battle-shock look to them, dilation in the eyes and tightness in the shoulders that most soldiers struggled with during their first few engagements. Samuel knew that these men needed a leader and badly.

"Troopers report," barked Samuel as he approached them and

when no answer was forthcoming he pointed at the least haggard looking of the group and said, “You, trooper, report. Where is the rest of the unit?”

“Me? Um, sorry sir, yes,” stammered the man in a thick upspire accent until he took a deep breath and straightened his shoulders, doing his best to get his nerves under control, “Our unit commander was killed in the descent, so we’ve been just hanging on as best we could. Once you shot the Reeker with the machine gun everyone went in different directions, it’s just us four that waited for you.”

“So you did.” Samuel nodded, looking the bedraggled group over. “We’ll move as a unit. I want to push towards the Basin gate and reinforce that position,” He readied his rifle, gesturing at one man. “You, with the shotgun, I’ve got a wounded Reaper in the shack behind me. Hold that shack until the medic arrives, it could take him a while to fight through, but he’ll have a ping on his system and know where you are.” He swept the other troopers with a look. “Let’s get this done.” Without waiting to see if the remaining three actually followed, he began striding deeper into the city.

Samuel and the three cor-sec troopers slipped out of the plaza and made their way down a series of gangplanks that angled towards the center of the settlement. There were several cor-sec corpses that they passed along the way, in addition to a few Reekers. While the noise of the fighting had died down the battle was far from over.

Above them, the settlement was ablaze as George Tuck torched buildings level by level while he too worked his way towards the Basin gate.

Samuel reacted with lighting fast reflexes, putting four single shot rounds into the chest of a Reeker who leapt out of a burning shanty. Whether it was an attempt to ambush the Grotto soldiers or simply escape the fire, Samuel could not tell. The shots caught the Reeker in mid-flight and sent him spiraling out and over the gangplanks.

Samuel and the troopers kicked down the door of a shack at the end of the gangplank network and shot the two Reekers hiding within.

The salvage marine couldn’t help but wonder what it must be like on the other side of this battle. The Reekers, regardless of what kind of reputation they had as a vicious downspire scavenger clan, were defending their homes from him, the armored invader from upspire. Samuel saw it in the eyes of the woman who lunged at him with a crude axe before he put a round through her throat and watched her tumble off of the plank, landing lifeless in one of the safety nets hanging below them.

He knew there had to be children somewhere in the settlement, silently thankful that he had encountered none and been forced to make the decision between following orders or disobeying. The

burning buildings above were beginning to collapse. Soon all that would be left of the settlement would be the metal scaffolding and support beams. In a way the fire was returning the chamber to its original specifications, removing the makeshift Reeker settlement as if it was a parasite that needed to be burned away from the flesh to which it clung.

The roar of the flames had drowned out most of the fighting, though Samuel and his troopers were close enough to the firefight raging ahead of them that they could hear the telltale signatures of Reaper combat rifles.

At a signal from Samuel the troopers followed him through the smoke and netting until they came upon the Basin gate. It was far less impressive in size than Samuel had expected, though what it lacked in size it made up for in sheer macabre decoration. The gates were festooned with netting that was littered with the bones of dozens of human beings and other creatures; it resembled a great shrine of sorts.

It was the largest sewage hatch Samuel had ever seen, and having been deployed in downspire for months now, that was saying something. It sported a sturdy metal frame and a huge crank wheel that opened or closed it. In front of the gate was a series of concrete flood breakers jutting up from a shallow spillway, indicating that the tunnel itself was actually a drainage pipe that was used to relieve water pressure in case the Basin ever flooded. There was a small platform just above the gate that had been reinforced with pieces of sheet metal, wood, and wire fencing to create a machine gun nest of sorts. The broken bodies of several Reekers lay beneath the platform, with one even hanging off of the barbed edges of the platform itself.

Boss Ulanti and the remnants of her squad stood behind the modest protection of the platform. They were exchanging salvos with a small, but stubborn group of Reekers who seemed oblivious to the fact that their settlement was burning down and the battle was all but lost.

The Reekers were using the flood breakers as cover, and Samuel knew that if this standoff went on much longer it was likely that the Reapers would be overrun. Even as he watched, a Reeker broke from cover and rushed the platform. Before he was gunned down he managed to hurl a homemade explosive that detonated in mid-air and showered the Reapers with a cloud of shrapnel.

The marine standing closest to the blast was pulped by the force of the explosion, pierced by dozens of nails, ball bearings, and scraps of metal that had been packed into the explosive.

Once more Samuel felt a tinge of guilt and regret that he hadn't learned the man's name, even though he had been with Tango Platoon ever since the Baen 6 Reaper corps had received reinforcements

following the battle on Tetra Prime.

Samuel and his troopers joined the fight and began shooting at the Reekers, though with limited success, as the flood breakers were semi-circular and prevented Samuel from flanking the clansmen.

Samuel bracketed one shooter's position and managed to flush him from cover so that Boss Ulanti could drill him with several short bursts of fire, but a concentrated counter-volley from the Reekers slew two of Samuel's cor-sec troopers and pushed Samuel back into cover. The marine's combat rifle had taken several hits, and Samuel was forced to draw his sidearm.

Suddenly Vol's booming voice could be heard below, shouting an indecipherable ganger war cry and Samuel risked a glance at the spillway.

The Rotted Kings ganger had managed to sneak up behind the Reeker position while the clansmen were focused on fighting Grotto forces on two fronts. The ganger wielded his heavy pistol like a short sword, using the bayonet blade to pierce and cleave even as he fired it point blank into the enemy.

Samuel watched with awe as he witnessed what ganger fighting really looked like. He had been underwater and engaged with the tentacled creature the last time Vol had been on the frontlines.

The ganger was an expert scout. During the weeks in which the Grotto forces had been fighting the guerilla war against the Haggard Sons, he was typically just another shooter during the small skirmishes. This, however, was pitched battle, and just like Patrick had said, Vol was something to behold. He fought in a martial style that looked as if it had evolved specifically for downspire close quarters combat.

The ganger held his pistol in one hand and a knife with spiked knuckles in the other, a living whirlwind of carnage as he carved his way through the Reekers. His wheel gun only carried eight big bore rounds, which he fired only when he wasn't able to engage the enemy at close range. To their credit, the Reekers did not back down. They drew their own knives and axes as they leapt into melee combat against the frenzied ganger.

Samuel was beginning to understand why they were called the Rotted Kings, as the single ganger wiped out all nine remaining Reekers in a matter of moments. Once the last Reeker fell Vol swiftly decapitated his enemy and held the head up by the matted air, blood streaking down his arm.

"Who runs downspire?" roared Vol, leaping on top of one of the flood breakers. He spread his arms wide in exaltation and challenge before hurling the head against the Basin gate so hard that it splattered across the metal frame. "One for the Stalker in the Dark!

The Kings are coming!”

The Reaper engineers were able to lower a gurney to hoist Spencer back up the entry point they’d drilled, and soon the marine was being transported upspire for advanced medical treatment. It was clear that he would be in recovery for a long time, though alive was alive as far as Boss Marsters and the rest of Tango Platoon were concerned.

The settlement took nearly twelve hours to burn completely to the waterline. The Reapers worked tirelessly through the smoke and flames to prepare themselves for the last push through Basin Gate. Samuel was feeling much better after four hours of sleep, a fresh brace of magazines, and a new combat rifle, though none of that could help him shake the growing sense of dread and foreboding he felt every time his eyes strayed to the gate.

Boss Marsters had ordered the bone shrines pulled down and thrown into the water to avoid overly disturbing the new batch of corsec troopers who had come to replace the dozens who had died in the fight for Reekertown, though everyone had the memory of what it looked like burned into their minds.

As the new force mustered in front of the gate, Samuel stood before it and took a deep breath, doing his best to ignore the stench of the waterline. Vol walked up next to him and followed the marine’s gaze. Then the ganger looked at Samuel and held his forearm out, waiting for the marine to return the gesture by knocking his own forearm against the ganger’s, which Samuel did, a warrior’s greeting in downspire culture that Samuel and Harold had learned after a night out drinking with Vol and his Rotted Kings brothers.

“We be legends now, chummer,” said Vol with evident satisfaction. He nodded at Samuel, then turned back to the gate while Boss Marsters and Ben struggled with the rusty crank wheel. The keening sound of the metal grinding on metal filled the chamber.

7. BASIN DEEP

Vol called them Stalkers.

When the first of them stepped into a pool of light cast by one of the work lamps, Samuel understood why.

The creature before him was humanoid, and perhaps, at some early point in its evolutionary journey, it had been a human being. Elongated limbs made it adept at climbing, a skill it displayed by scuttling across the pipelines overhead like some four-legged spider, dropping down to face the Reapers and cor-sec troopers head on.

The thing's flesh was a pale white and even though its eyes were mostly hidden beneath large, handcrafted goggles, the marine could tell that the pupils were huge, which would be perfect for life in the quarter-light of deepspire. Leather breeches and patchwork armor made of what looked to be hides, scrap metal, and wire twine covered its emaciated body.

Samuel couldn't tell which was more intimidating, the overwhelming stench of the stalker or the bizarre looking gun clenched in its bony fists.

Despite all that they had been through, the Reapers and cor-sec troopers both were nevertheless stunned by its appearance. That pause gave the creature the opportunity it needed to raise the strange gun and fire. A ball of bright orange slime exploded from the muzzle of the weapon and streaked towards the Grotto soldiers, leaving wispy trails of orange gas in its wake.

Samuel snapped out of his shock enough to hit the deck and roll to his right, a move that kept him out of the projectile's path, but dumped him into one of the sluice pits surrounding the drainage pylon. The marine shouted as he plunged into the foul, knee-deep liquid, scrambling to rise into a firing position. He locked onto his target just as it fired a second round at the Grotto soldiers. The marine began drilling it with disciplined shot groupings. The first three rounds knocked the creature back against the far wall with smoking holes in its chest, the next three shredded its abdomen, and then the final three caught it in the head and neck as the creature bent over in pain before collapsing in a heap.

All around him Samuel could hear the throaty cough of the strange slime guns, the familiar staccato chatter of Grotto small arms fire, and the sounds of dying soldiers. The marine hoisted himself back onto the deck to join Bianca in laying down suppressing fire while Holland did his best to help the wounded. Samuel fired several rounds at another of the scuttling Stalkers as it tried to advance over the edges of the sluice pits, though in the quarter-light he wasn't sure if

he'd managed to score a kill.

"Dammit, this stuff is corrosive!" cursed Holland as he examined a dead cor-sec trooper whose body was already being eaten away, then rushed to the next trooper only to find her dead as well. "Okay, people, whatever it is, if it gets on you it'll eat a hole straight through, so take care how you position your body if you get splashed!"

Samuel could see by the corroded rents in the decking and the bodies of three cor-sec troopers that whatever these Stalkers were shooting was absolutely fatal if they even managed a partial hit.

The cough of the guns was unmistakable and from the sound of it, there were a dozen or more shooters out there in the quarter-light. The marine spent his last few rounds pushing another Stalker back into the darkness in a cloud of blood before he dared survey the unfolding battle at large.

The vast drainage pylon chamber was awash in the dull caustic glow of the slime guns as the projectiles streaked through the fetid air, some to strike flesh and armor while others splattered against walls and plating. The muzzle flares of the Reapers and cor-sec troopers added their sharp illumination to the tableau before him, and Samuel could not help but briefly be in awe of it. It reminded him of the Founding ceremony, when he first shipped out as a Reaper.

Typically Grotto culture was not one of mirth or celebration, though society did take a fierce, even if dour, pride in the launching of a new venture. The fireworks of his departure had looked much like this as they exploded over the smog-choked skyline of the city while his transport ship had risen into high orbit to rendezvous with the tug itself.

"Squad Ulanti sending! We need back up on Pylon 4!" screeched the static-filled voice of Boss Ulanti.

"Welding team took eighty percent casualties. Without another welder I need six minutes to get this beam cut. Get me welders or shooters *ASAFP!*"

Six minutes, thought Samuel to himself as he and the rest of the Grotto soldiers retreated to the next set of barricades, this fight was going to be over long before that if the stalkers continued to press them this hard. The slime guns were chewing through the portable flak boards at a rate of a plate for every two impacts, and after the hard march through downspire, Tango Platoon didn't have very many left as it was.

Command kept reinforcing their company with fresh cor-sec recruits from the surface, each batch more ill-equipped and poorly trained than the one before it.

Virginia had begun to openly suspect that Grotto was intentionally hurling bodies into the downspire meat grinder as a way

of avoiding the cost of caring for the tremendous refugee population. As for marine reinforcements, all of the two dozen Reaper platoons aboard the Baen 6 tug were deployed in quadrants all across downspire.

It was likely, thought Samuel, as he continued to fire, that each Reaper element was facing its own sort of bloody subterranean ordeal. These last months had been hard on everyone. However, as dangerous as the rest of the Reaper missions no doubt were, nothing was a harder target than the Basin. Naturally Tango Platoon was right in the thick of it.

Everyone knew that Pylon 4 was going to be the beast, as it was the primary support for the downspire quadrant above, which supported the massive Forge Prime complex upspire. Boss Ulanti had started the demolition prep with ten welders from the Reaper support crew, who worked the salvage operations with the actual soldiers once the combat danger was neutralized. None of the support crew had the kind of training the Reapers did, but they were numerous and a lot of hands could get a lot done, as Samuel had learned during the scrapping of the space hulk.

“Squad Marsters sending. Launching counter-assault on suspected point of entry for Stalker forces,” came the crisp no-nonsense voice of Boss Wynn Marsters, “Sek volunteered and is en route alone from Pylon 2, needs Squad Aiken shooters if available. No additional resources at this time.”

As the radio buzzed with chatter, Squad Aiken and the cor-sec troopers dug in behind the corroded remnants of their flak boards. Ben Takeda took point and opened up with his heavy machine gun while the rest took firing positions around the pylon, literally placing their bodies between the busy welding crew and the threatening darkness. Samuel knew it would buy them some time, and hopefully whatever that time was, would be enough for the welder crews to cut all four of the pylons. Once they were cut the sheer pressure of the tonnage being applied to them by the spire levels above would hold them in place, but they would be permanently severed.

After the cuts were complete the Reapers would affix several bombs, each contained in an armored case to prevent tampering from any possible enemies or curious scavengers. Once they were safely back in upspire the demolition crews would detonate and all of the levels would enter a controlled collapse as Forge Prime, now gutted of all valuables beyond mere scrap metal, plummeted into deepspire.

“Boss!” said Samuel as he crouched down next to Aiken as the squad leader re-loaded his combat rifle, “I’ll lead a few of the cor-sec troopers to Pylon 4 if you can spare us.”

“Hyst, I need everybody here if we’re going to hold the ground

long enough to get the pylon cut and have enough bodies and bullets to push our way out of this chamber," snapped Boss Aiken as he racked the slide on his rifle and pointed to his dwindling pouch of magazines.

"Boss, if we don't get all the pylons cut then demolition won't be able to get a clean blast, the collateral damage might end up squeezing the margins too hard," observed Patrick as he fired the last round of his magazine and worked quickly to swap it out for one of his few remaining fresh ones, "Besides, we don't have enough ammo to execute a proper retreat as it is."

"I'm not accustomed to grunts giving bosses tactical advice," growled Aiken as he returned to his position and fired several rounds at the enemy as if to emphasize his displeasure, "But your logic is sound. We're down to twenty percent ammunition reserves from the look of everyone, and if we find that we've been followed and some enemy has set up a hard point back the way we came then we would have to launch an assault just to retreat."

"Kade, get me three cor-sec troopers from the firing line, preferably ones who look like they won't piss themselves when Prybar does something reckless and heroic," ordered Boss Aiken as he looked at Samuel and gave him a begrudging nod of respect. "See that you don't die needlessly, that's bad for business."

"Roger that, Boss," Samuel replied as three cor-sec troopers mustered at the base of the pylon, each carrying well-used combat shotguns and a sling of shells over their shoulders that had far more empty slots than full ones.

"You three on me, we're heading across the pits to bail out Pylon 4."

Samuel and his makeshift squad turned and set off into the quarter-light. He had no clue how he was supposed to find Jada Sek in the middle of all this chaos, but he figured that as long as they kept heading for Pylon 4 they were bound to cross paths.

After a few minutes of leaping in and out of the sluice pits, Samuel could have sworn he heard the sounds of things splashing out there in the murky quarter-light that hadn't been there moments before. His instincts screamed at him that this was a threat, and he turned to see that the cor-sec troopers clearly felt the same, as they all had their guns up and ears cocked. The sounds stopped and Samuel reluctantly signaled for them to move onwards, on the double.

When the makeshift squad seemed to be about halfway to the pylon, one of the sluice pits off to their right exploded with activity as something in the pit began thrashing and splashing. Another pit to the left erupted with similar disruption and from it emerged a long white creature that to Samuel's mind looked to be the exact match for a

Baen bone worm; only this one was nearly twelve feet in length.

The creature's head tapered to an armored point with no less than three gaping mouths on the underside of the armored head. The three cor-sec troopers screamed and began unloading their shotguns at the creature, their steel shot ripping chucks out of the bone worm's body and sending it writhing and wailing as it spurted blood and viscera in all directions.

Samuel looked away from the carnage only to see a second one slide out of the pit on the right and make a dive at one of the cor-sec troopers. The marine shouted a warning and raised his rifle just as the creatures pointed head slammed into the man's back so hard that the armored point punched out of the other side of the trooper's ribcage. The point, apparently its mouth, peeled back in barbed sections, which it used to haul the trooper's body off the ground and drag it back to the waters of the pit.

Samuel yelled and fired his combat rifle, part in anger and part in revulsion as his mind was flooded with memories of how the bone worms would hunt rats in the steamy darkness below Assemblage 23. He felts as if he was living in a nightmare and pulling the trigger was the only way to wake up. In seconds, his magazine went dry and his fury was spent, leaving the shredded corpses of both the trooper and the worm floating in the fetid water.

Samuel reloaded and looked at his two remaining troopers. He found them to be shaken, but not broken. The three of them turned away to continue toward the pylon.

Samuel saw the white sheen of mucus on the lip of a nearby sluice pit just before another worm reared up and charged them, only this time they were on guard for such attacks. Between the marine and the troopers they gunned down the worm in a hail of fire.

Samuel realized that the mucus was an indication of which pits were likely inhabited and which weren't, so he did his best to lead the squad on a path that would take them wide of worm pits. It slowed their progress considerably and by the time Samuel and the two troopers were within range of Pylon 4 it was clear that the situation had gone from bad to worse.

Boss Ulanti and George Tuck stood behind the meager remnants of their portable barricades, guiding the defensive efforts of a scant handful of cor-sec troopers. It was clear from a swift tactical scan of the area that Pylon 4 had suffered the brunt of the attack, and though they had repulsed the enemy for now, the cost had been great.

The corroded and smoking bodies of cor-sec troopers were scattered across the base of the pylon, joined by the armored remains of two salvage marines. Stalker corpses peppered the area, though more were taking cover in the pits surrounding the pylon and

exchanging fire with the dug-in Grotto soldiers. Samuel couldn't see the welding team, though from the activity behind the barricades it was likely their numbers had dwindled since Boss Ulanti's last plea for assistance.

Samuel turned back to the two cor-sec troopers and indicated with his hands that they follow him and they were more than eager to obey. This was a shooting gallery, with minimal cover for any of the combatants beyond the shallow pits and the shadowy shroud of the half-light, which Samuel doubted hid much of anything from the sight of the Stalkers. The only reason the Grotto soldiers were still holding this ground was the portable flak board barricades they had been issued as a protective measure for the welding crews, and of those, very few remained.

Ever since the Haggard Sons had blown the metro line nearly a month ago, Reaper command had been using support crews with hand tools for much of the salvage work. That meant much more intensive manual labor, but there also happened to be a displaced urban population that was more than happy to have a chance to earn some cash and a hot meal. Those who couldn't cut it as cor-sec were laborers, and it was with muscle and bone that much of Vorhold had already been picked clean.

Samuel moved towards a better vantage point and found a pit that gave him enough of a view of the battlescape that he could provide covering fire for the defenders of the pylon and engage Stalker targets. The marine took a deep breath and raised his rifle to his shoulder to draw a bead on the back of a Stalker as it fired shot after shot from its slime gun.

The marine toggled over to three-round burst and then squeezed the trigger. The Stalker jerked violently, and for a moment Samuel thought it was going to return fire. He saw that its mouth hung open in shock, its ribcage blown out from the impact of his rounds. The creature splashed face first into the pit and sank into the rancid, shallow water. To the cor-sec troopers credit they managed to intuit their best use, and employed their short range shotguns to deadly effect against another Stalker who attempted to flank Samuel as he focused intently on executing his marksmanship.

More shots rang out with the familiar signature of a Grotto combat rifle and Jada Sek appeared out of the darkness on Samuel's right. She fired at a steady pace as she waded across the pit adjacent to his and between the two of them another three talkers were cut down. Several slime rounds hissed and splashed into the pit where Jada was standing and she was forced to hurl herself into Samuel's, surfacing again as she found her footing in the murky, but only waist-deep liquid. One of the cor-sec troopers screamed as she was

enveloped by a slime round and fell into the water as the left side of her body disintegrated.

"Over the side!" shouted Samuel. He grabbed Jada by the shoulder and helped her jump and roll over into the pit in front of them.

The cor-sec trooper behind Samuel fired into the blackness as he backed up, and the marine vaulted over the edge. Samuel turned and began searching for a target when his field of vision was overwhelmed with buzzing orange light. He instinctively ducked into the water; his last vision before going under was the cor-sec trooper's silhouette as he faced a fusillade of slime rounds. The impact shook the pit and Samuel could hear the sizzle of the metal and see water burning, so he kicked off the bottom and emerged from the pit with his rifle at the ready. Jada Sek emerged at the same time and together they went full-auto, hurling a combined two magazine's worth of bullets chewing through the small squad of Stalkers that had been harassing them.

"Fancy meeting you here, soldier," smiled Jada as she swiftly re-loaded while the two of them sloshed through the pit towards Ulanti's position.

"Boss Marsters said you were making a lone wolf thing happen," Samuel joked before squeezing off another three-round burst that forced a Stalker to dive into a nearby water pit. "I didn't want to miss the show."

"One minute to full cut," reported Boss Ulanti in their com-beads, "Everyone on me. When we're through, I want all elements moving out. Boss Aiken, we are coming to you, can't hold this position any longer."

Jada and Samuel rushed up the steps and without needing to be told, each half-slung their rifles so that they could be fired from the hip with their left hands. With their right hands they each lifted the most intact flak board they could find and held it aloft like a shield. George Tuck did the same and soon another five of the cor-sec troopers were following suit. There were only three welders left, but as they sliced through the last centimeter the cheer that went up from them sounded as if they were making up for the other seven who lay dead at their feet.

"Form a square, center on the welders," barked Boss Lucinda as she took up her own flak board and half-slung her rifle, "Reapers on the corners. Let's move!"

The haggard unit retreated from the dais and began making their way across the treacherous expanse of sluice pits.

"White mucus on the edge of the pit means it has a worm," stated Jada as the formation worked its way forward, exchanging fire with several Stalkers as they went, "Can't imagine what they'd do to a

person if they got hold of you."

"It's not pretty," said Samuel in a low voice before peeling a few rounds into the legs of a Stalker, who was then finished off by a hail of pistol fire from several cor-sec troopers.

One of the troopers went down screaming as a slime round corroded away his flak board just before a second splattered against his pelvis. His body soon floated in two smoldering pieces, slowly sinking beneath the slop as the formation closed ranks and pressed on.

The Stalker attacks had somewhat abated and soon Pylon 2 was in sight. They had lost two more cor-sec troopers in making the journey, and both Samuel and Jada had discarded the melted and useless remnants of their flak-boards.

Samuel heard the harsh inhuman voices of the Stalkers to his far left and turned to face them just as two groups attacked them at once. He could hear Bianca shouting for him, both in his com-bead and his raw ears, and all around him the world erupted into chaos.

Stalkers had dropped down from the ceiling and were fighting among the Reapers and cor-sec troopers, somehow also having awakened one of the bone worms. In the back of his mind Samuel suspected that the Stalkers had captured the worm and dropped it on the squad to break their formation before making the assault, though the very thought of it was so disturbing he pushed it away and focused on the fight.

The worm's head was burrowing into a trooper's wet guts and the creature's thrashing body knocked Samuel off of his feet and over the side into another pit. The marine pushed off the bottom and broke the surface of the water only to go under again as a Stalker leapt upon him.

He could feel strong jaws clamp down on his armored neck while clawed fingers probed the joints of his armor for an opening into which to dig as the creature used its superior strength to pin him down and keep him submerged. Samuel reacted swiftly and let go of his combat rifle, trusting in the sling to keep it attached to his body, and reached for his service pistol.

The Stalker managed to tear away one of his torso plates and bury a claw in his side just as he pressed the barrel of the gun to its chest and squeezed the trigger. Round after round drilled into the creature and soon it went limp on top of him. Samuel rolled it away from him and despite the pain in his side got to his feet. In the time he had been submerged, Squad Aiken had apparently executed a counter-attack, as Bianca, Patrick, Holland, and even Boss Aiken all stood in the waist deep water with smoking gun barrels.

What didn't make sense was that Patrick and Bianca were holding George Tuck by the arms and preventing him from running off into

the darkness. Samuel went cold as he realized that Jada Sek and Boss Ulanti were both nowhere to be seen.

8. THE STALKER IN THE DARK

“They took ‘em as breeders, Boss,” Vol said gravely, using an already filthy rag to clean out some of the gore plugging the barrel of his bayonet pistol. “They’ll be alive for a long time and worse for it.”

“We heard the same from other downspire folk back in FOB Specter,” added Samuel as he looked at Ben and Harold.

“Two weeks sidelined with the locals, you get told some stories,” said Harold. “Women and children being carried off, people disappearing around corners like they just vanished into thin air. Spooky stuff.”

“Stalker tribe don’t have soft meat,” spat Vol, holstering his pistol. He pointed at the catwalks leading deeper into the Basin towards the warren. “Nothing weak survives down here, and Stalker been the big bogeyman a long time.”

Boss Marsters listened to the marines and the ganger speak, though his eyes never left his weapon as he field stripped it, cleaned it, and re-assembled it in record time with the kind of precision that only comes from obsessive practice. Once finished he slid his last magazine into the receiver and racked the slide, and then handed it to a surprised Virginia as he stood up to face the remnants of Tango Platoon. He toggled the protective shielding of his helmet’s faceplate to transparent so that everyone could see his face as he spoke.

“Boss Aiken, I am relinquishing my command of Tango Platoon and the cor-sec attachment. Upon completion of my final orders you will be platoon leader,” Boss Marsters began, eliciting troubled looks from the assembled marines and cor-sec troopers, along with a frown from Boss Aiken. “I will be recovering Boss Ulanti and Jada Sek myself, as I have no intention of leaving them in the hands of the enemy.”

“Let’s go get ‘em, I’m ready,” said Ben, causing many of the assembled soldiers to look between him and Boss Marsters.

“If Jada is still alive there’s no way I’m not going with you sir,” George Tuck stated before Boss Aiken stepped in front of Boss Marsters, “I’ve got a quarter tank left on the flamer, there’s got to be something down there that will burn.”

“I cannot allow this kind of unsanctioned action,” Aiken said, facing off with Marsters while his hand strayed to the auto-pistol at his hip in an open display of defiance. “After witnessing the combat capability of these hostiles it would be an unjustifiable risk of human resources. Two marines are a loss, adding three more to the balance sheet is unacceptable.”

Wynn Marsters shifted his weight on the balls of his feet and all

of the tension seemed to leave his body at once. It was the smallest of movements, and barely noticeable by anyone but those standing right next to him, however, everyone in the assembly knew as if by some primal instinct that the platoon leader was poised and prepared to unleash terrible violence. Wynn's facial expression never changed, and his eyes never left Boss Aiken's, but everyone saw the promise of death coiled and waiting within the Reaper.

Boss Aiken slowly and carefully stepped backwards and moved his hand away from his sidearm. From his rapid breathing into the open com-bead channel it was clear he'd gotten the message.

"Consolidate all available combat rifle ammunition from the platoon and distribute evenly to the highest ranked shooters available, right now that's Tillman and Green," said Boss Marsters, removing the small platoon leader disc magnet and tossing it over to Boss Aiken, "Sidearms and boarding knives for everyone else. Boss Aiken, I want this unit double-timing back to Reekertown and the extraction point. Put Spencer on point, cor-sec and marines in the middle, with Tillman on rearguard. My recovery op will likely draw most Stalkers away from the unit, but stay sharp.

Once we have our Reapers recovered we will be at the extraction point, but the charges above are on a schedule, so if we aren't there before the trigger goes green, leave us behind."

"I'll track 'em out for you, Boss." Vol interjected. "Stories say those warrens are tricky, tricky," Vol then pointed upwards to the distant ceiling of the Basin. "Nothing for the Kings up there anyway, just soft meat and too much light. Better to bang with the Stalkers."

Boss Marsters nodded curtly at Vol, who hooted and sprang forward to search for their path. Wynn began making his way through the sluice pits towards the warren catwalks. He had only gone a few steps before George Tuck, Ben, and Samuel moved to follow him. As they splashed into the first pool Marsters turned back to face them and the assembled unit.

"Hyst, fall back with Tango Platoon. Boss Aiken is right, this is an unsanctioned action, and pursuant to Reaper Code 267 the beneficiaries of any marine killed in such an action will be denied payment of the offending marine's death benefit," said Boss Marsters, his otherwise iron hard demeanor slipping for an instant as he looked at Samuel. "I had them put that Augur spine in you and if you die it's your family that gets saddled with that debt. I don't want that on my soul. Fall back, Hyst. Now."

Samuel stopped half-way out of the first sluice pit and stood still for a moment as the weight of Wynn's words hit him with the force of a gunshot.

Samuel felt tears of rage and frustration sting his eyes. He gritted

his teeth and watched George leap over the side of one pit and into another as he followed the former platoon leader into the darkness. Ben paused next to Samuel and clapped his shoulder plate.

"Boss is right, brother, think about Sura and Orion." He nodded at Samuel and moved into the next sluice pit, then turned back and displayed his boarding knife with a smile. "Let the rest of us kill some monsters for once, Prybar!"

Samuel tried to laugh at Ben's boasting, but it tasted false in his mouth. Behind him he heard Boss Aiken barking crisp orders at the rest of the platoon and the cor-sec troopers. The marine took one last look at the three Reapers disappearing into the murk then reluctantly returned to the column.

Samuel walked past Virginia and handed her his remaining magazine, which was only half-full anyway, then slung his rifle across his back before drawing his side arm and unsheathing his boarding knife. The remaining cor-sec troopers and welders had formed up in the center with the Reapers spread amongst them. It was going to be a long march back to the extraction point, and Samuel knew that despite Boss Marster's hope that the recovery would draw most hostile attention he knew their retreat would not go unopposed.

"Vol was right, there's nothing up there for any of these people," breathed Virginia as she looked upwards while the platform rose through the breach, the lift wench groaning as it struggled with the weight of so many bodies, "No choice but a life-bond or the red list."

"Most of the ones who qualify for a work assignment will choose the bond," said Boss Aiken as he joined the two marines in watching the lift reach the top of the breach and begin disgorging its cargo of refugees. "And they'll find meaningful assignments in the labor pool or cor-sec; at least until the Vorhold project is completed."

"What then?" asked Samuel, his voice flat in anticipation of an answer he already knew.

"You've been around, Hyst, as have you, Tillman;" answered Boss Aiken, "You know just as well as I do that once Vorhold is scrapped only a small percentage of the bonded will be re-assigned within the Grotto workforce. The rest will be re-classified as non-essential and their employment will be terminated."

"Without work they'll default on their life-bond repayment and be dropped into the penal system within a few months of termination, especially since we've just cut up and sold off their entire civilization," groaned Virginia as she stepped back from Aiken a few paces and turned her face away from the lift and the two marines.

"Certainly this is all speculation, Tillman, and I apologize if this line of conversation is upsetting," said Boss Aiken as he looked to Samuel for support, "But this is how business is done. For one to rise,

another must fall, it's the Grotto way. It's our way. You must see that."

"I know, the Grotto way, they drilled that into us during basic," grumbled Virginia as she squared her shoulders and did her best to shrug off her rising temper. "They've been conquered and there isn't much profit in mercy. I see that very clearly, doesn't mean I have to be happy about it."

"This job will eat at you from the inside out if you let it, Tillman, your mistake is thinking that human rights matter to the Bottom Line," Boss Aiken replied, reaching out to touch the base of the platform as it descended once more. He began waving on the next group of refugees while speaking through the com-bead, "No corporation is going to feed, clothe, house, and educate these people without some mechanism for a return on that investment. The only value these people have is their capacity for labor, and Grotto will extract that value one way or the other."

"Slavery or the red list," Samuel said into his com-bead as he helped an old man and several children onto the platform before giving a thumbs up to Boss Aiken, who then pulled the lever and sent the platform rising upwards, "Tough choice."

"Tough galaxy," agreed Boss Aiken. The three marines continued in silence as they moved group after group up the lift. Each time they loaded the platform, Boss Aiken looked nervously at his chronometer, and then over at the Basin gate, which still remained open.

"Hyst, it's been four hours since we left the Basin and an hour since we've been back through the gate," Boss Aiken stated while the last platform of refugees made its way towards the breach, "I can't have viable military resources placed at risk any longer. I am already going to be called to face a board of inquiry for holding the gate open for the hour I've allowed. We have to seal it up and exfil."

"There are still easily another ten loads of non-combatants who need the lift," added Virginia, "Then at least four trips for Tango Platoon, cor-sec, and our gear."

"All of that can be done after the gate is sealed," Boss Aiken responded, and he looked as if he was going to say more when the low throated growl of the chain gun filled the chamber.

All eyes went to the gate and spillway directly in front of where the marines had constructed a hasty fighting position using their last scraps of flak board, metal sheeting, and the chain gun mounted on a hand-welded tripod.

Boss Marsters had requisitioned the chain gun from a fellow Boss in Delta Platoon, who had liberated it from one of the precious few cor-sec assault vehicles that had once patrolled the elite districts.

The Vorhold masters had intended for the handful of gun-trucks to deter any threat of civil unrest in the elite districts. They had

performed admirably, but had now been cannibalized by the salvage marines. Delta Platoon had been pulled from downspire work and was being sent to scrap the small orbital station once used as a customs holding facility. With Delta Platoon going on a void mission they had little need of the chain gun, and the Boss was happy to send it downspire to help an old friend and comrade.

Since Tango Platoon had to leave the gate open behind them as they pushed into the Basin to rig the pylons for detonation, Boss Marsters wanted more than a cadre of cor-sec troopers with pistols to watch his back. After the three hour forced march back through the gate, Boss Aiken had relieved the cor-sec troopers of their duties and assigned them to crowd control.

Harold, the only rated heavy gunner left in Tango, was spitting rounds through the gate as Bianca fed the ammo belt and kept it moving smoothly.

“Marr, report!” shouted Boss Aiken as he and the other marines rushed toward the spillway, “Tillman and Holland, I want you working the lift, keep those people in order and shoot anyone who causes trouble.”

“Reapers downrange!” shouted Harold in between bursts of fire.

Boss Aiken, Patrick Baen, and Samuel arrived at the spillway gun nest and took up firing positions on either side of Harold and Bianca as they scanned for enemies.

What greeted their sight was at once inspirational and terrifying to behold. Several flares burned in the half-light of the Basin on the other end of the tunnel entrance, and the marines could see much of the partially submerged concrete flood chamber and support structure that divided the sluice pits of the interior and the Basin gate which they now guarded.

Slogging through the eighteen inches of liquid sewage, as fast as he could, was Boss Wynn Marsters, his shoulders weighed down with the armored body of Ben Takeda and from what Samuel could see, his best friend hung like dead weight. Wynn’s helmet had been burned, presumably by one of the slime rounds, which explained why no hailing had sounded on the com-bead.

In one hand he held Vol’s heavy pistol, apparently loaded with micro-flare rounds, which he periodically fired in different directions in what seemed to be an attempt to light up the chamber. The projectiles would embed themselves into the concrete support beams or the low ceiling and spit bright red flame and light for a few seconds before burning down to a dull glow that provided more ambient light for the area.

Samuel had seen Vol load those rounds before, though he’d never seen the ganger load the entire gun that way.

Next to him ran Boss Ulanti, helmet missing, but with her emergency re-breather strapped on. Slung across her shoulders was an unconscious Jada Sek. The armor of both women was gone and they were dressed in only the matte black body gloves Reapers wore beneath it.

As much of a relief as it was to see the four marines rushing towards the gate, the horror and revulsion that swept through the marines in the gun nest at the sight of what was behind their comrades robbed them of that relief. Thanks to the flare rounds, the chamber was partially illuminated in a dull red glow. From the darkness of the chamber beyond, a veritable wall of writhing giant bone worms had emerged. There were dozens of them slithering and thrashing through the water as they pursued the fleeing marines.

Over the sound of the chain gun there was a keening sound that made Samuel sick to his stomach. As the sound moved up and down the octave scale the marine realized that it was an artificial sound. He could see that, as insane as it seemed, the worms seemed to move and undulate in time to the keening sound.

There was little doubt in his mind that there were Stalkers somewhere back there, just behind the light, driving and guiding the herd of frenzied worms.

Harold and his chain gun were positioned perhaps twenty inches above the chamber, thanks to the spillway architecture compared to the flood chamber, and that provided him with just enough elevation to fire his weapon over the heads the fleeing marines and into the mass of attacking worms.

“Patrick, you’re with me! That gate has to close before the worms break through or everyone dies!” ordered Boss Aiken as he hefted his service pistol and rushed out from behind the gun nest. “Hyst and Kade, I want you across the way, when Harold’s line of fire is impeded by the door I want you to provide cover fire and pull our people through if they reach us in time!”

“Boss, this chain gun won’t last long without a jam if I don’t have a loader to keep it clear!” Harold yelled in between deafening bursts of the weapon, sending barrages of high velocity rounds tearing through the writhing mass of deadly worms as they gained more and more ground on the weary marines who ran before them.

“You won’t have much time, anyway!” Boss Aiken snapped and with that he and Patrick sprinted towards the gate to begin closing it while Samuel and Bianca backed out of the nest and made for the other side.

Harold snarled in frustration as he continued to burst fire and tear apart the hostile creatures that pressed onwards heedless of the grievous damage he was doing to them.

Boss Aiken and Patrick positioned themselves next to the door and waited, giving the fleeing marines as much time as they could to reach the other side of the gate. Samuel dared not lean in too far for fear of friendly fire from the chain gun. He could tell that they were drawing near as he began to hear the desperate splashing as the escaping marines struggled through a foot and a half of water.

Samuel could also hear the inhuman grating noise of the worms as they slammed their heads into the tunnel floor, presumably only narrowly missing their prey. Seconds later Harold's chain gun jammed and the big marine cursed as he stepped back and kicked the gun in an attempt to clear the action.

Boss Aiken nodded gravely and he and Samuel began pushing against the door with all of his might. The door began inching closed, groaning as the rusted hinges fought against their combined strength. Without Harold's fire as a risk, both Samuel and Bianca turned the corner and pointed their sidearms down the tunnel. The worms were closing in on the marines as they struggled through the water. Samuel watched with dread as a worm attempted to impale Boss Ulanti with its armored head, only narrowly missing the squad leader and burying its head in the metal tunnel wall.

Samuel and Bianca opened fire, their bullets whizzing over the heads of Boss Marsters and Ulanti and into the tangle of worms that had all but plugged the tunnel from top to bottom. Boss Marsters slipped through the gate and was followed by Boss Ulanti. Samuel emptied his sidearm and as Bianca fired her last round the marine grabbed her around the waist and pulled her back on top of him as they fell away from the closing gate.

Boss Aiken and Patrick slammed the door against the mass of worms trying to force their way through, one of them even managing to get its head through the gap. Harold slammed himself against the door, the force of his impact decapitating the worm and giving Patrick a chance to crank the wheel which locked the gate in place.

With the gate firmly shut and the worms held at bay, at least for the time being, Samuel risked a glance at Boss Marsters and the other marines realizing belatedly, that the rescue had not been without sacrifice.

Glaringly absent were George Tuck and Vol, and worse still, to Samuel's horrified gaze was the mangled and corroded mess that was the front of Ben's helmet, a gaping crater where his lower jaw should have been.

9. COLLATERAL DAMAGE

When the bombs planted in deepspire detonated, Samuel and Jada could feel the rumble as the pylons were blown out even from the high rise balcony of the medical center. The two marines watched as the great FORGE ALPHA shook violently and then suddenly collapsed into the sinkhole that formed at the edges of the complex and rapidly swallowed the entire quadrant of upspire.

Buildings that had been stripped down to bare concrete collapsed inwards upon themselves and the weight piled on as more and more of the superstructure came apart. It was an awe inspiring display of demolition skill by the engineer corps, to so expertly calculate the pyro loads, angles of descent, and relative weight of the area to be collapsed. Not a single building that wasn't on the demo list was harmed. Once the site was given a full day and night cycle to settle, the support crews, with Reaper foremen and security details, would bring in the giant salvage cranes.

Using powerful magnets they would pull up the scrap metal and prep it for transport. The prize pieces were, in fact, the support pylons. They were so large that the pylons would be carefully lifted from the rubble and cut while still protruding from the sinkhole. As each pylon was cut into manageable sections they would be hauled to a staging area for holding. It would take several trips with more than one scrap barge to move all of the material off world.

There would be enough raw metal from just one of the pylons salvaged from underneath FORGE ALPHA to build several ships the size of the lumbering Reaper tug. The fact that the forge had been supported by four of them meant that just the salvaged pylons would be enough metal to build an entire fleet of ships.

There was not a doubt in Samuel's mind that Grotto would reconcile as an acceptable expenditure, the cost of the lives and bullets of the handful of Reapers and several score cor-sec troopers that were spent in penetrating the Basin to cut the pylons and prep them for salvage.

There were hundreds of other, smaller pylons spread throughout the city, and in due time all of those would be taken as well. Reaper Command had deemed it prudent to salvage the city one quadrant at a time once the surface had been stripped and it was time to collapse the hollowed out upspire.

Much of this, Samuel suspected, had to do with the intel Tango Platoon had gathered with regards to the presence of the bone worms and Stalkers. Despite the detonations and subsequent collapse, it was highly likely that some Stalkers and worms survived, so Reaper

security details, with cor-sec support, were on duty at all hours while the looting of Vorhold continued.

"There's no way the collapse wiped out those monsters," said Jada in a small voice as she stared unblinking at the gigantic hole in the ground. "We'll be fighting them tooth and nail until Grotto finally decides to abandon the site. They'll be here haunting the ruins long after we've run out of things to salvage."

"Plenty of Vorhold people who chose the red list over the life-bond will also be here," agreed Samuel. He folded his arms in front of himself and watched the first of the cranes approach the new work site. "And eventually pirates, smugglers, pioneers, and every other kind of red list scavenger will find their way here. Maybe now that there's nothing valuable remaining, this planet will be abandoned by the corporations and re-settled by the red list."

"At least until they discover some other kind of resource that's buried here, like back on Tetra Prime," said Jada as she continued to stare at the growing plume of dust and smoke from the collapse. "Even if it's a decade or a century from now, eventually someone like us will be back to pick the bones clean one more time, and when they dig up that hole they'll get what they deserve."

"Jada, before the Boss found you, what happened down there? What did you see?" asked Samuel in a quiet tone as he laid his hand gently on her shoulder, only to have it shrugged off as she turned away from both Samuel and the window so that she would walk over to Ben's unconscious form.

"It was the bottom of the world, Prybar," Jada whispered as she looked down at the wounded marine, "Where the sins from our way of life sink down to pool and fester."

Samuel remained silent and watched as Jada moved her hands delicately over the outlines of Ben's new face.

The marine had sustained a grievous wound, though Boss Marsters had not witnessed exactly how it had happened. From what the field surgeons had told Samuel it seemed as if Ben's jaw had been sheared from his body with a semi-sharp blade and a tremendous amount of force, which lined up with what Samuel had seen the bone worms capable of doing.

Despite the gore and mess, it was the force of the blow that had made the cut somewhat clean and prevented any tearing of Ben's windpipe. With Boss Marster's approval, the surgeons had cleaned the marine up provided Ben Takeda with an apparatus that most marines called 'the grim'.

It was a small miracle that the grim was covered by the standard Reaper health plan, and Boss Marsters had opted not to upgrade the device with anything out of the plan. Now, Ben's face had a molded

ceramic face mask, with armor plating on the cheeks, chin, and forehead, covering his head from his brow to the base of his neck. The eye holes allowed Ben to use his unaltered sight, and the apparatus was small enough that it still fit inside the standard issue Reaper combat helmet. Once in place, the grim looked like a black skull face grafted to the flesh of his best friend, and more than anything he looked like the Grim Reaper himself, hence the name for the mask.

In his years with the fleet Samuel had only seen one other person wearing a grim, Gannet, from Epsilon Platoon, and Samuel knew it was going to take some getting used to. The grim would assist Ben in breathing and was retro-fitted to allow for a liquid diet, which Ben would be on for the rest of his life.

"I didn't see George die," said Jada suddenly, "Boss Lucinda was already carrying me by then, but I could hear him, roaring as loud as his flamer before they killed him. He was gasping, and then nothing."

"And Vol?" asked Samuel, careful to keep his tone gentle, as if speaking too strongly would spook his comrade and close her back down.

"He found us. Killed the ones who…" Jada whispered before she paused for a moment, then took a deep breath and squared her shoulders, looking once again like the fierce marine that Samuel knew. "He took the fight to them, gave us a chance to make a run for it."

Jada looked as if she wanted to say more. She opened her mouth, closing it again as the duty light on Samuel's belt buzzed and started to flash green. The marine depressed the acknowledgement stud and the light ceased to blink. Jada, still in hospital scrubs, walked over to the marine and gave him a swift hug before stepping back and sitting on the stool next to Ben's bed.

"Duty calls," said Jada as she made herself comfortable and flashed Samuel a weak smile.

"You'd think after the downspire campaign Vorhold could do without Tango Platoon for at least another day," grumbled Samuel, though he half-smiled as he said it. The smile faded as he took one last look at Ben's grim new face. "If I'm not here when he wakes up…"

"I got this, Prybar. Don't worry, I'll ease him into it," Jada said as she brushed her hair out of her face, inadvertently revealing the scarred claw marks on the left side of her face, "This is the job."

Samuel nodded. "This is the job."

10. THE ELLISIAN LINE

Samuel was in the briefing auditorium of the Reaper tug, listening to the shift manager make the initial informational reports to accompany the data presented in the briefing packet that had been passed to every marine in attendance. Samuel had already read through the concise information. His mind had wandered back to the near month he'd been able to spend back home after the grueling tour on Vorhold.

The Reaper fleet had been sent back to Baen 6 for a rest and refit period of thirty-five days, which marked only the fifteenth time he had been able to see his family since becoming a Reaper so many years ago.

Sura had been distant, over the years they could not help but grow apart in small ways, though he could tell she was trying her best to make him feel welcome and loved. His son Orion was growing up so fast and the marine did his best to forget his troubles in the warm embrace of his family. However, that warmth soon faded; as such things did, when he and Sura had to face the hard reality of their situation.

Thanks to the extended hazard deployment on Vorhold, Samuel had banked enough of his Reaper pay and hazard bonuses to buy off Sura's life-bond and as well as his own, which he'd been chipping away at ever since first shipping out. For several days all of their options looked grim, in that it was simply more of the same.

More soldiering for Samuel in the cold dark of space, more time for Sura and Orion alone on Baen 6; both of them knowing the longer Samuel stayed a Reaper the more his chances of survival dwindled. They had learned over the years that there were very few retired Reapers, as nearly ninety percent of them remained trapped in the debt cycle, or simply could find no better work planetside and died on the job.

The Reaper death benefit program, in its own strange and brutal way, provided the marines with an assurance that if they died on the job they left their families, or whomever they chose, with a sizeable lump sum. It was common for marines to think of the benefit as their final sacrifice for those they left planetside, which worked well for Grotto as the hardened veterans represented much in the way of a return on investment.

Apparently Grotto Corporation had heard their prayers for another combat deployment mission as one became available to Reapers across Grotto space who had achieved enough hazard service hours. The Baen 6 fleet had seen more combat since it's founding than

most Reaper fleets by a modest margin, and it had been tapped as the flagship for the operation.

Each Reaper who qualified was invited to attend on a first come first aboard basis until the full complement of one thousand marines were mustered. The list filled up within hours, as the hazard pay was doubled, with an unprecedented bonus award easily the size of a full death benefit upon mission completion. The threat level was Alpha Class, and beyond the skirmish with the Helion elites on Tetra Prime the Reapers of Tango Platoon had not faced a threat so aggressively classified.

Still faced with a grinding slide into debt even after six years of battle and no closer to changing Orion's future of life-bonded workforce servitude, there was little discussion of the matter between Sura and Samuel. They had to make a play, risk and reward, because the safety net had never been there in the first place, and they had finally seen the truth of that. Samuel and Sura agreed to a paper divorce, so that Samuel's medical debt became his own. They used the remaining funds to pay Sura's expatriation fee. Orion had not begun compulsory school so he had no pro-rated life debt.

After the expatriation of his now ex-wife, Samuel used what they had left to purchase a long term lease on an orbital space station just on the edge of the Baen system. It was a modest sized station that functioned primarily as a fueling point for ships moving in and out of the Baen system in addition to a secondary function as a trading post for the various smaller industries that moved goods through the handful of warehouses and retailers on the station's main deck. There were several hab-block style compartment clusters that were mostly used as temporary housing for ship crew during docked repairs.

It would be a tough place for a single mother and her son, though Samuel had them set up with the funds they would need to survive while he was gone. If the mission was a success he could pay off his medical debt, cover his own expatriation fee, and have enough to set them up with a new life far from Grotto. As it was, Sura and Orion would keep a low profile and wait for him on the station.

They made love on that last night as if it would be the last time, which they did every time he left, though that night it had felt different. It had felt to Samuel, for the first time, like this time it could be true. He'd felt that certainty so powerfully that he'd gone into the Reaper financial benefits office and double-inspected his death benefit assignment just to be sure.

All Reapers who had served a minimum of two years were assigned a death benefit, which was to be paid to whomever the Reaper logged as his or her desired recipient. After those two years the benefit amount, which was modest, would slowly grow by

miniscule daily increments.

If Samuel died on the mission he knew his death benefit would at least get Sura and Orion off the station with enough resources to provide for them while Sura pledged to a new corporation. There would be no homestead without his survival. At least Samuel knew that if he were to die, Sura would be able to take her time and find a corporation more suitable and less grindingly inhuman. One way or the other his family would be taken care of. That was a certainty he needed to combat the growing feeling of doom that had been building in his mind ever since waking up in the middle of the night several times while home. His nightmares of Tetra Prime were now joined by twisted visions of downspire. Decisions made, there was nothing more he could do and he committed himself to the mission at hand.

The planet designated UK1326 was a small grey world, and had it possessed 0.2% less mass it would have been classified as a moon. As it was, the unique planet hung in a wide orbit between two dying stars.

Conventional planetary science estimated that within another few thousand years the increased gravitational pull of the two suns would rip the planet into pieces as the entire sector was slowly drawn into a black hole. Such natural phenomena were not uncommon in the deeper parts of necrospace, where the star systems were at their most ancient.

In their early education, children in the Grotto system, like those in most other corporate institutions throughout the universe, were taught that known space was shaped like three interconnected rings, each smaller one inside the borders of the larger one.

The largest was frontier space, the wild and untamed fringe of the universe containing the newest planets and the youngest of star systems, many of which were still molten balls of rock and swirling clouds of gases.

The central ring was generally referred to as mapped space, or more commonly, corporate space, and contained the bulk of human civilization, as many of the planets and star systems within were matured enough to sustain life.

The smallest ring was called necrospace, sharing the same designation as the forgotten and used up worlds of corporate space. Within necrospace the planets were ancient, the star systems decayed and dying, and any resource of value already stripped away. However, there were often anomalies of physics that puzzled scientists of the age, and many suspected that necrospace might actually comprise more area than any thought possible. It had proven difficult to create accurate mapping of necrospace beyond a certain point.

There were a multitude of planets and systems in necrospace that

had been successfully mapped and exploited for what little wealth remained, but once ships reached a specific distance from corporate space it was as if the laws of physics became more fluid.

A scientist named Dorian Ellis pinpointed the border within necrospace, and thanks to his discovery, spent much of his life working there, funded by an Archon Industries grant, to discover what exactly was going on. Dorian died before he could draw any definitive conclusions. His funding had been pulled in the later years of his life due to failure to yield any profits, as apparently it had been seen as venture capital and not an actual grant.

Dorian had become convinced that a civilization much older than humanity had populated the area of space that existed on the other side of what had become known as the Ellisian Line. He postulated that there must be a singularity at the center of the universe, drawing old space into itself even as frontier space expanded, which held with conventional astrophysics understanding of the age.

However, where Dorian's theories became untenable within the corporate world was his adamant belief in this unnamed ancient civilization. He claimed to have been to a planet on the other side of the line that contained a dead city, filled with artifacts that had led him to believe that this ancient civilization had attempted to alter the singularity. He insisted that somehow they had broken the laws of physics, and that the very fabric of the universe had remained broken long after their passing.

Sadly, he was not able to provide an accurate location for the planet, and was professionally deposed. His numerous volumes of photographic evidence supporting his claims were later deemed fraudulent. Dorian had died in relative poverty and professional disgrace, though he was still credited with the discovery and subsequent establishment of the Ellisian Line.

Corporate ships did not cross the line; because the locations of planets or entire star systems would change, maps could not be trusted on the other side. The distance between one place and another would warp in transit.

In corporate culture it was considered unprofitable to venture beyond the Ellisian Line. Even pirates would not venture beyond it, much less the various squatter flotillas that wandered the universe; which was why Samuel found himself leaning forward in his seat with a sense of shocked curiosity as the shift manager displayed the first of several maps detailing the mission.

"You were all made aware of the Ellisian Line during your compulsory education, and from the looks on your faces I can tell that you realize this map details a small star system on the other side of the line." The shift manager looked out at the assembled marines, "I

had the same look of shock on my face, but you'll get over it."

She zoomed in on the map, past the line, to reveal a more detailed photo image of UK1326. The surface of the planet swirled with dark clouds of grey and black, and what little ground they could see looked to be rock scrabble and vast expanses of barren earth.

"The information you are about to receive is classified, and I will remind you that any breach of the non-disclosure agreement you signed upon taking this mission will be treated with the upmost severity," the shift manager warned as she gripped the edge of the podium and looked hard at the assembled marines. "We don't know how or why, but UK1326 and its two suns appeared during a routine scanner sweep by a Grotto chartered prospecting ship. By happenstance the prospectors took the same route back to corporate space three months later and the scanner revealed the same star system, existing in space in the same coordinates. Thanks to the report, this system has been under observation for six months, and it has yet to disappear, making it anomalous compared to the other systems on the other side of the Ellisian Line.

Several probes have been sent to the planet and it has been determined that a derelict city, with no signs of life, exists on the planet surface, and Grotto has decided that the time has come to exploit the opportunity."

The sound of several hundred marines breaking the silence with a mixture of whispers, groans, and exclamations of awe swept over the room. The shift manager allowed the moment to settle in, and then continued.

"The planet designated UK1326 and the two dying suns around which it orbits prevent the planet from having any discernible night or day cycle. It exists in a perpetual half-light, which when combined with the frequent and thick cloud cover creates an environment poorly suited to effective probe reconnaissance missions beyond broad stroke observation." The shift manager activated another screen to reveal a multi-dimensional terrain map populated with various figures that Samuel took to indicate foot soldiers.

"Reapers are designated as militarized salvage operators. We do not have the sheer number of soldiers required to responsibly seize a city sized objective. However, given the unknown nature of the city and its apparent lack of a living population, there is no avenue within corporate protocol to requisition the use of elite troopers, and not enough revenue assurances to justify the presence of mercenary contractors."

"Oh man, is she going to say what I think she's going to say?" asked Ben as he leaned over to whisper to Samuel, who had still not gotten fully used his friend's now completely digitized voice.

“I have a bad feeling that she is, poor bastards” grumbled Samuel as he gripped the sides of his seat, having realized who all of the figures were supposed to represent. “This mission is getting spookier by the second.”

“As some of you might have guessed, Grotto has authorized the founding of Penal Legion 223 for this mission.

A full legion of five thousand convicts from Gulag 223 completed their training while we were in transit to the mission site and they will be our vanguard.” As she spoke, the shift manager pressed an activation key to animate the figures, who moved through a monochrome cityscape in large groups.

“Monitored and commanded by their Line Wardens, the legionnaires will make planetfall at eight different sites and converge upon the city. Though our intelligence on the exact size of the necropolis is incomplete, we estimate by the architectural borders that the legion will be able to sweep and clear the target within sixteen hours of planetfall. Naturally, if resistance is met that timeline could be altered. Once the penal legion has seized and secured the city, Reaper detachments will make planetfall and begin exploration and salvage operations.”

The shift manager shut down the screens and looked sternly at the marines.

“This Reaper cadre to which you now belong has been assembled from a multitude of fleets and though you may not know the marine on either side of you, be keenly aware that each of you are here because of your distinguished service records, proven loyalty to Grotto interests, and your desire to achieve success.

The bonus pay you are receiving represents the degree of trust placed in you by Grotto Corporation. On the balance sheet, that pay is tallied as an investment in this mission; though I hope you understand that it is also an investment in you. This necropolis could be the greatest salvage in Reaper history, and you are here to share in that victory. Think on this as you prepare.

We reach UK1326 in eighteen hours. Squad leaders will receive updated mission specs and are to report to the penal observatory upon arrival. Thank you and good luck.”

“Does she really expect us to buy into all that loyalty gibberish? The fact that our hazard wages and paying completion bonuses still don’t equal the cost of mercs really show you how low we are on the wage scale,” Ben scoffed quietly as he and Samuel left the briefing auditorium. “I’m in it for the money, plain and simple, so don’t mess with my morale by rubbing it in my face just how cheap I am, regardless of what’s good for the Bottom Line.”

“Good,” Samuel replied. “Because that’s all that matters to Grotto

too; the Bottom Line. As long as we treat the company the same way it treats us, well, that seems like the closest thing to empowered equality that we're going to get," Samuel snorted. "Everyone is here for the money, that's why you and I are here, heck that's why every marine from Tango Platoon showed up for this one. Well, except Boss Aiken, from what I heard he got promoted into Command. It just eats at me that management feels compelled to spin it like we're doing something noble."

"That's corporate culture for you, man," Ben laughed as he and Samuel headed back to the barracks for much needed sleep. "Didn't that merc, Imago, tell you something about how the attachment of ideology to soldiering is just a way for the company to shave off some wages?"

"Pretty much," agreed Samuel before pausing in the corridor to look at Ben. "You know, I've been thinking a lot about what he said actually. What it might be like to fight for ourselves, you know pick our own missions, get paid prime wages."

"Those dropsuits are expensive brother, and besides, you gotta pay off that spine before you can even start to save up the expatriation fee," Ben said as clapping Samuel on the shoulder while they continued towards the barracks, "Let's do the job, get paid, and take this thing a day at a time. Just think about it, if that city is as full of loot at Grotto thinks we could be sitting out here on an easy salvage job for years. Remember how long we had on the space hulk? Yeah the fighting part was a real beast, but the six months of no-combat salvage? That was the easiest money we've ever made. A duty tour on this rock and you'll be able to expatriate, get your family off that station, and move somewhere with sunlight and fresh air, maybe some trees."

"You are a relentless optimist, Ben Takeda," laughed Samuel as he slid open the door of his rack, "Get some rest and I'll see you tomorrow."

"Copy that, Boss," nodded Ben, just a slight shift in his tone as he addressed Samuel by his new rank. He continued down the corridor to his bunk, stopping long enough to playfully fistfight Harold as the two men crossed paths.

Samuel closed the door to his rack and sat down on the edge of his thin mattress. He felt as if he had a lead weight in his gut, and had been a soldier long enough to know that it was fear. Samuel had faced fear over and over in his time as a Reaper, and it had become a familiar companion.

There was something wrong about the planet they were about to reach. Something in the maps that tugged at the back of his mind, almost as if his reaction was instinctual; a threat from a half-

remembered dream. No city stood empty without reason, and if Grotto was bringing five thousand convict soldiers to sweep the city then there was something management wasn't telling them.

Samuel was reminded of the turbine station back on Tetra Prime, the pointless fight with the mech-warrior that had cost him his spine and his freedom. He had begun to doubt himself and his decisions, and suddenly found himself angry with Sura for how confident she was in him, how sure she was that he could succeed, or even return to them before the credits ran out.

Sura and Orion were off Baen 6 and out of Grotto, but how long could they wait for him on that station? How long would his son have to live in the cramped compartments and corridors? At least on Baen 6 the hab-block unit had been big enough for the three of them, and there were plazas and open spaces to visit, even if they all rested in the shadow of Grotto overculture. On the orbital station Sura and Orion were sharing a single room, and there were few places the boy could go to play or run.

Samuel knew that if he survived this job he'd be able to set them up somewhere planetside on a world worth living on, and it saddened him to know that even then he would still be trapped in Grotto's rigged financial system. He took out his data pad and ran the numbers again, as if somehow they would be different the hundredth time he calculated them.

He could pay off his debts to Grotto, and either relinquish the expatriation fee for himself or fund a homestead for his family. His choices seemed grim, unless there were indeed untold vaults of riches to be won on the dead planet. He could have freed himself from Grotto, but then he and his family would all have been living on Pier 16 without hope of ever leaving.

Pier 16 was on the fringe of Grotto space, and as Sura had discovered, there was a deep prejudice in Grotto space towards expatriated former citizens, and they'd labor in the lowest wage positions as a result.

Samuel let himself fantasize about what it might be like to actually succeed in this mission, to walk away with wages, easy salvage, and a completion bonus. There were agri-worlds where Sura and he could grow food for a living if they owned land, or they could even go to one of the wild planets on the frontier and simply live apart from corporate civilization, the same way the FOLKEN did.

Samuel knew that his choice was clear, and that he had to provide for his family, regardless of the loneliness he might feel or the likely death he faced. One way or the other his family was taken care of, so long as he signed the dotted line and took up his rifle. If he died, Sura would endure it, but in time she would thrive, as he knew and

loved that no amount of hardship could break her. She would find another partner, as he knew she had during some of his longer deployments, and she would raise a son to be proud of.

The klaxon bells awoke Samuel from a troubled sleep and he realized he must have fallen asleep while still tinkering with his data pad. It did not do to dwell on the maybes and the what-ifs, Sura would have told him, and he stood to wash his face and prepare for the coming mission.

“This is the job,” said Samuel several times as he looked at himself in the mirror, imagining how Mag would have sounded if she’d been barking in his ear, “Get it done, marine.”

11. THE LEGION

Fifteen minutes later Samuel Hyst presented himself to the sentry who stood guard outside the observatory, and was allowed inside.

“Boss Hyst, welcome to the observatory, I’m Technical Officer Ingrid, let me show you how the system works,” said the middle aged woman in a crisp warden’s uniform as she approached him with an outstretched hand, which Samuel shook. “As you can see, the Grotto Correctional Department has performed some modifications to the traditional observatory stations on board this Reaper tug.”

Ingrid led Samuel around the room and he saw that there were a large bank of monitors lighting up the area, and at each one of them sat a Reaper squad leader. Boss Ulanti and Boss Marsters both noticed him and gave him respectful nods. Even those small recognitions of his promotion by Boss Aiken before the man assumed his Command meant the world to Samuel, to be accorded respect by such hardened veterans was more of an achievement to him than he realized. He fleetingly thought of Mag and missed his old squad leader, then focused his mind on the task at hand.

“There are approximately eight hundred and seventy-five Reapers on this mission, and as you can see, we have arranged for there to be an interface available for each of the one hundred and seventy five squad leaders, such as yourself.” Ingrid led Samuel down the long rows of the sizeable observatory compartment while pointing to the many workstations occupied by other marine squad leaders. “Each squad leader will be linked up to a Line Warden on the ground who commands twenty nine legionnaires. You will be able to observe the camera feeds and data-uplinks for all of the legionnaires, in addition to open lines of communication with the Line Warden themselves.

Naturally, your role during the initial phase of the operation will be to act in an advisory capacity to identify salvage hot spots and guide against unnecessary collateral damage should armed resistance be encountered.”

Samuel nodded and remained silently attentive as Ingrid escorted him to an empty workstation, flanked by two Reaper squad leaders he did not recognize.

“Boss Hyst, welcome to your designated station, we will be conducting an interface orientation and final mission briefing in ten standard minutes.” Ingrid presented a faux smile that Samuel was sure she’d practiced many times in order to perfect. “In the meantime, please make yourself comfortable.”

Samuel took his seat and looked around the room to see that most of the Reaper squad leaders had filed into the observatory shortly after

his arrival, and the seats were starting to fill up in short order. The scale of the mission was like nothing he had experienced in his time as a marine, and he found himself begrudgingly impressed with the genius of it all.

Though many corporations ruled their populations with various financial schemes and economic coercion, none were as cunningly brutal as Grotto Corporation. Human beings were just as much a natural resource to be exploited as any ore, mineral, or gas in the vastness of space.

The nightmare that crouched just beyond the debt based social order of Grotto Corporation was the abyss into which a person would disappear if they were unable to make at least their minimum payments. After several warnings for missed payments or payments below the minimum required amount, citizens would be picked up by bondsmen and hauled to the local detention centers for processing and sentencing.

Bondsmen were a special breed of law enforcement officer that specifically sought out those unfortunate citizens who could not, or in some occasions refused, to pay their debts to Grotto. Bondsmen were dangerous, and would not hesitate to kick down doors and assault people in public to get their quarry. Once detained, the debtor would be given a sentence, one that took into account the total debt owed, payment history, and workforce assessment.

The ugly truth was that although most sentences were only a few weeks or months, all of the court proceedings, bondsman recovery fees, and cost of imprisonment were added to the citizen's Grotto debt. As a result, a significant portion of first time offenders found themselves back in detention within just a few months of being released. Most workforce assessments provided only subsistence wages anyway. Usually the only people who were able to "rehabilitate" were those who lucked into promotions at work or experienced a death in the family, either of a dependent whose absence relieved the citizen of that financial burden or a relative who had arranged for a death benefit.

Second time offenders were automatically detained and rotated into the Grotto penal system, which was comprised of several moons that orbited a number of planets in Grotto space. Massive prison complexes had been built into those moons, and served not only as detention facilities, but as forced labor camps. Some of the prison moons doubled as factories or refineries, and low security convicts would be able to work down their debts and sentence by working the machines.

Others were vast salvage yards where much of the materials procured by Reaper fleets ended up for final processing. Rumor had it

that Penal Legions would be founded from these populations when Grotto needed a cheap military option for one purpose or another. The convicts would volunteer for duty in much the same way the Reapers did, with the hopes of the additional earnings helping pay down their debts and move them towards freedom.

Samuel had never seen a legionnaire, and stories of their military exploits were simple rumor and tall tales told in school. If his time in the Grotto military had been any indication of how non-elite military assets were treated, it made a great deal of sense why he'd never even heard of a retired legionnaire.

Warden Ingrid cleared her throat as she approached the podium, and the lights in the observatory dimmed somewhat to enhance the luminosity of the speaker. She began to brief the assembled Reapers on the technical specifications of the workstations, instructing them on how to toggle between each of the legionnaire's shoulder cameras, in addition to maintaining communication and data-uplinks with the Line Wardens.

As Samuel made notes to himself on his personal data-pad, Ingrid explained that the Line Wardens were all combat veterans of one branch of the Grotto military or the other and functioned as the command structure for each of the legionnaire platoons.

Unlike the Reapers, the legionnaires did not work in squads, and only broke down as far as platoons, the size of which differed even from the Reaper definition. Each legionnaire would be issued a standard pattern combat rifle with one magazine pre-slotted and two spare magazines on graft mounts attached to the stock.

Samuel wondered what the legionnaires were supposed to do if they were forced into a protracted engagement. As Ingrid explained the harsh discipline exacted by the Line Wardens he realized that Grotto did not care.

The average marine rifleman loadout was easily twenty high capacity magazines, sometimes more if the individual marine was willing to deploy without a sidearm. If the legionnaires could not get clear of a fight with their three magazines it was deemed to be a state of diminishing returns to further supply the penal soldiers.

The Line Wardens were armed with a combat repeating shotgun utilizing a drum magazine so that they would not have to reload for a long while. The shotgun and the thirty round big bore auto-pistol on their hips were designed to be used on the legionnaires as much as the enemy.

The threat of being executed in the field kept the soldiers in line when they were deployed, and if it didn't, the small remote explosive implanted in their necks that would detonate if they left the maximum set distance from the Line Warden's command collar made sure that

they did as they were told.

Ingrid assured them that the legionnaires were highly motivated soldiers, each of them having been signed to a contract that dramatically reduced their sentences and debts, giving them all a better chance at a modicum of freedom. Samuel had never met a rehabilitated convict who had come from a penal legion, and he was skeptical that anyone survived long enough to gain their freedom.

If the mortality rate of the Reapers were any indication, it was unlikely that any of the legionnaires would live to breathe free air. They were used as battle fodder, and though they were perfectly clear on that fact, there was always hope. Samuel felt a kind of kinship with the legionnaires in that moment. The mission clock chimed and the monitors flickered to life.

The legionnaires were already packed into their landing craft, and Samuel could watch through the shoulder cams as each of the convicts looked at each other, checked their weapons, and prepared for deployment. Samuel donned his headset and began to toggle between the cameras to get a feel for the system, and did a quick read of the Line Warden's personnel file.

Line Warden Shoto was a former bondswoman who signed on with the legion during the founding, so this would be her first combat mission with the group. The mission clock chimed again and the landing craft's engines ignited, sending a hailstorm of craft into the void above UK1326. The invasion had begun.

Making planetfall from orbit was always a dangerous affair in Samuel's experience, even when not sailing through flak clouds and anti-air barrages. The refurbished craft that comprised the penal landing cadre were recycled transport haulers from old Hive Fleets, outfitted to carry human cargo and their meager provisions.

Of the many dozens that were launched into the void, four of the ships burned to slag in atmosphere, and as the squad leaders of those ships in the observatory stood to leave, Samuel considered that it had been a less costly infiltration than he was used to.

Samuel had never observed planetfall from orbit, having always been 'in the can' as the marines often called it, and it had been a thing of dark wonder. He mused at how many times other observers had watched with callous detachment as assault ships were thrown into battle.

Samuel's platoon jostled in their seats from the gravitational force as they plummeted to the planet surface. Another two landing craft must have been destroyed on impact or otherwise had critical landing failures, as moments after Samuel's platoon hit dirt two more squad leaders in the observatory stood and left the room.

The bay doors opened and Line Warden Shoto bellowed for the

convicts to disembark. The legionnaires hit belt releases and as their boots crunched the gravel underfoot the shoulder cameras began to reveal cyclopean structures looming in the fog just beyond the landing zone. Shoto barked for the convicts to form up and the platoon moved forward as they assumed a human ‘v’ shape.

Shoto took up a position in the concave center of the formation, both to have a full view of the entire platoon, but also to have a clear arc of fire that would enable her to wipe out the platoon easily with her repeating shotgun. It was a brutally genius method of maintaining martial discipline while remaining combat effective. Samuel was impressed despite his misgivings about the injustice of the prison system itself.

Samuel noticed that the cloud cover of the sky extended all the way to the ground in a sort of swirling fog, and it was no wonder that the un-manned probes had such a difficult time piercing the gloom. It was only the low-tech cameras and the crude satellite signals being bounced up from the drop ships that made observation of the legion possible. According to radio chatter among the Reaper squad leaders, Samuel knew that there were dozens of platoons nearby, all pushing towards the distant skyline, though through the fog it was difficult to make a line of sight confirmation with more than one or two other platoons at a time.

The legionnaires made swift progress across the broken ground and soon began to enter the outskirts of the necropolis. Immediately, Samuel felt the knot in his stomach tighten as through the camera he saw the strange buildings emerge from the fog. He could not pinpoint what exactly was so disturbing about the buildings, which looked perfectly capable of use by humanoid beings, complete with doorways, windows, and seemingly interconnected streets and sidewalks meant for vehicular and pedestrian traffic.

“The angles are all wrong,” Samuel said under his breath, prompting a few sidelong glances from the Reapers in his vicinity.

“Copy that Reaper Command,” Shoto grumbled as she responded, reminding Samuel that his mic was still active, “How are legion vitals? They’re getting jumpy.”

“Green across the board, Warden,” said Samuel as he swiftly checked the body statistics for the platoon, “I am noticing that they aren’t checking the blind corners on the approach and back-shadows on the pass.”

“We’re performing the requisite anti-sniper sweeps,” Shoto said curtly, her voice taking an icy edge that Samuel imagined aided in her former career as a bondswoman.

“Line Warden Shoto,” growled Samuel as he decided that it was time to flex his command authority, if not to save face, but more to

save lives, “Blind corners on the approach and back-shadows on the pass, there could be hostiles capable of employing tactics beyond human physical possibility. We’ve crossed the Ellisian Line. How copy?”

“Good copy, Reaper Command, and duly noted,” responded Shoto before she switched to the legionnaire channel and her voice piped into the com-beads of the convicts as she relayed the new field protocols.

Samuel and Shoto kept their communication limited to as-needed specifics, the same as the rest of the Reapers and Line Wardens, while the penal legion entered the city from multiple directions.

The odd angles of the buildings had begun to be a topic of chatter on the Reaper command channel as squad leaders began to share ground intel. The general consensus was that the buildings were constructed and oriented towards humanoid occupation, with little apparent defensive capabilities. The notation of defensive capabilities indicated that there had been no additional occupation by squatters, pirates, or rival corporations. Any such groups would have erected hardpoints and various fighting positions throughout the city to enable them to defend their claim.

While certainly, most modern cities in corporate space were constructed without defenses from ground invasions, most of their defense coming from orbital batteries and warships; it was a standard tactic to create fortifications during occupation.

Though all of the Reapers knew of the anomalous conditions of the mission, given that planets almost never remained at the same coordinates for more than a few days or weeks on the other side of the Ellisian line, it was still a sign that they were the first to properly explore the target site since whatever catastrophe befell it.

One platoon far to the north of Samuel’s reported observing grooved pathways underneath a damaged section of building, the wall having been knocked down by what appeared to have been a tiny meteorite. Other groups, as well as Samuel’s, had found standard meteorite damage, which was common on most all planets that had been floating through the void without the advantage of air shields or defense batteries, and it was a common part of the planetary life cycle. Photos were uploaded of the damaged wall and the Reapers instructed their platoons to look for corresponding grooves in the streets, only to find that they existed through the city.

At first they’d appeared to be a sort of open sewage system or guttering network, though with the new evidence from the damaged building it looked as if most of the buildings were slotted into the grooves and capable of moving along them. It was thought that perhaps the city was even older than they’d thought, and the grooves

were there to help thousands of hands to push the cyclopean buildings into place as they were built block by block.

Most of the buildings looked to Samuel to be a cross between a pyramid and a sphere, and though they did seem to be constructed out of a conglomerate of molded beams and smooth blocks, he just could not pinpoint exactly how any of it was physically possible.

The blocks were a mix of smooth metal and some kind of glassy stone that registered as unknown in the Grotto databanks. Each platoon had a portable mining lab which allowed them to take samples and upload analysis as they passed through the city, and nothing they sent back could pierce the mystery.

As the platoons plunged deeper into the city the buildings became larger and more complex, until after a few hours it seemed as if the physics of the planet must be wrong somehow, as the increasingly bizarre designs of the buildings could not possibly be built by any process or laws of physics that was known to Grotto, possibly to humankind at all.

Samuel knew that the other Reapers were thinking the same thing he was, that despite the growing sense of dread there was a spark of greed that had begun to grow hot in the breast of the professional salvage soldiers.

If their salvage tools were able to be modified so that they could harvest even the raw building materials, it was indeed possible that this would be one of the greatest finds in Reaper history.

Samuel found that he was counting his fortunes before the city was secure, and worked to control his breathing and manage his expectations.

Shoot first and salvage second was a common phrase among the marines, though it was difficult to maintain that mental discipline when he and the other squad leaders knew that if they could secure the city, the sheer tonnage of the find would keep them earning those elevated hazard wages for months.

Grotto had indeed found an excellent motivational tool for the veteran salvage marines.

Just as Samuel was beginning to daydream about the pristine cabin on the edge of a great forest where he and Sura and Orion lived in peace and health the real nightmare of UK1326 began to unfold.

12. NO EASY DAY

Suddenly one of the shoulder cameras of a legionnaire began to move strangely, and his vitals spiked into the red. His voice was muffled as if something was covering his mouth, but Samuel could tell through the legionnaire channel that the man was screaming.

A second legionnaire's camera swept up to reveal something with a humanoid torso and too many legs descending from the fog just as their camera went dark, vitals spiked red, then to black.

"*Shoto, you're under attack! Both flanks!"* Samuel yelled into his com-bead as the Line Warden swept her gaze from left to right, her camera revealing nothing but empty city and confused convict soldiers, Samuel shouted, "*Back-shadows! Back-shadows!"*

"*I see them! What the hell-*," Shoto's voice cut off as her camera revealed a bizarre hostile carrying one of her legionnaires up the sheer side of a building and into the thick fog above.

Samuel sat back in his seat as his mind struggled to comprehend what he'd just seen. The Reaper had, in his time, faced everything from mutants to marauders and it seemed like every stripe of scavenger the universe had to offer, not to mention Helion elites and security troopers. Nothing up to now had prepared him for the barrage of images he was seeing through the cameras as Shoto bellowed for her troops to form a defensive circle with her in the center.

Another legionnaire's vitals spiked then blacked out. Gunfire erupted as convicts began shooting at the hostiles. Another legionnaire's vitals went black as bullets riddled his body. Through the camera feeds Samuel could see sparks and scraps of metal flying off the arachnid body of a hostile that was attempting to drag away the man's bloody corpse. The Reaper didn't get the best look at the hostile, though he could tell from the fleeting images of it before the hostile dropped its prey and fled into the darkness that it was at least part machine.

He guesstimated that it was roughly two meters in size, so in order to scale the sheer walls of the buildings while carrying the full weight of the legionnaire it had to have tremendous strength. The humanoid torso had a head with a sunken metal face, more like a mask, and the arms of the hostile looked as if they had several small gun barrels mounted on them in addition to sharp hooked edges that enabled them to kill and haul away the bodies of their prey.

More gunfire from the circle took Samuel's attention to the camera feeds of those legionnaires and he could see that their bullets seemed to have little effect on the strange walls of the buildings

themselves. He made a mental note that for better or worse, it looked like at least small arms fire would cause little in the way of collateral damage.

Unsurprisingly, it looked like the discipline of the legionnaires, still green from their training, and experiencing a truly terrifying first taste of battle, was breaking down swiftly. Most of the soldiers were firing blinding into the fog, blasting away at shadows with no effect before fumbling to swap out magazines.

It was during those shocked moments of vulnerability that the gun spider creatures seemed to strike; leaping out of the fog and shadow to wrap metal arms around their victims and pull them away in a spray of blood or to rush the legionnaires and rapid fire their projectile weapons with deadly effect.

Samuel watched from Shoto's camera as her vision tracked one of the gun spiders climbing up the wall with a convict in its grip and could see as he zoomed in on the feed that there were tiny green pulses of energy that rippled through the blocks of the buildings as the machine spider's legs ran across it. It seemed to Samuel that the building itself was somehow aiding in the gun spider's apparent defiance of gravity and the opposing mass of their prey.

Shoto shouted for her platoon to maintain firing discipline but her cries fell on deaf ears as the platoon fell apart. They'd already lost eight of their number in the last few seconds, while those that weren't attempting to flee were being divided into smaller groups by the swift attackers.

In another handful of seconds, most of the lone soldiers who had been separated from the larger groups of legionnaires were picked off by the creatures, falling to the scything limbs or hails of bullets from the hostile machines.

From Samuel's vantage point he was only able to see through the live feeds from the cameras of the legionnaires still in the fight, as the feeds from those who had been killed were limited at best.

The repeated bark of Shoto's shotgun brought Samuel's attention to the Line Warden and he watched in horror as she gunned down two convicts who were attempting to flee. That fatal show of force galvanized the remaining convicts to stand their ground as Shoto approached them with grim authority.

"Line Warden Shoto, this is happening across the whole damn city, pull your people back to the landing zone!" ordered Samuel while the observatory exploded with activity as hostiles were being engaged by the full legion. "We can rally there and wait for further orders; at least you won't have it coming at you from all sides. How copy?"

"Form a square and fall back on my command!" she shouted as

she brandished her shotgun at another soldier who looked as if he was about to run. “We retreat properly or die right here! *Form up!”*

Shoto snapped orders as the legionnaires rushed to form a tight square, standing shoulder to shoulder so that each soldier’s line of fire overlapped the other. The shattered and smoking bodies of several gun spiders were strewn across the streets, though far too few in comparison to the heavy casualties sustained by the legion so far. Shoto stood in the center and shouted for them to move out, insisting that they maintain tight fire discipline.

“We’ve only got the ammo we came with and your ammo is your life! Keep it tight, only shoot when you know you can hit something,” she growled as the remaining soldiers moved briskly back down the street.

The hostile attacks became sporadic as the legionnaires rushed towards the landing zone. The convicts did their best to fire only when a hit was assured. However, the legion had pushed deep into the city and it was a long way back to the landers.

Once they’d cleared the main skyscraper section of the city, Shoto’s platoon of twenty-nine had been reduced to a mere eleven soldiers in addition to the Line Warden.

Though Samuel had a hard time following the camera feeds through the fog he was positive that they’d eliminated at least four more hostiles. It was likely that others lay destroyed in the fog and shadow beyond the camera’s view.

These creatures seemed to have been built for stealth and lightning assault rather than a stand up fight and he was confident that had it been a platoon of Reaper veterans down there the tide of battle would be flowing in the other direction.

The legionnaires weren’t equipped with the kind of battle armor and multi-functional helmets that the Reapers used, much less the security forces and elite troopers of the greater Grotto military. Had the legionaries been better equipped, with infra-red and low light vision settings on their faceplates, proper rifles and more than just a few weeks training then perhaps the fighting would have gone differently. By the time they reached the lander Shoto’s platoon had been steadily whittled down to only the Line Warden and three convicts with empty rifles.

Throughout the city the scenario had been similar, with the legionnaires being relentlessly assaulted by the gun spiders, with many of the legion’s corpses being carried off into the darkness toward fates unknown.

Samuel saw many of the squad leaders get up from their chairs and storm out of the room while others gathered around the work stations of squad leaders like himself who still had active soldiers on

the ground.

A shout from Shoto brought Samuel's attention back to the fight at hand and he saw Shoto squeeze the trigger of her shotgun and blow a convict off his feet as he swung his rifle at her, presumably to get at her weapon for himself and she'd killed him for it.

Gun spiders took the last two convicts in a hail of bullets and Shoto broke into a dead run towards the lander. A metallic chittering sound filled Samuel's ears and he saw through the feed as Shoto turned around to face three of the machines that were rushing across open ground to reach her.

Shoto bellowed a war cry and unleashed the full fury of her repeating shotgun. The hurricane of shot from her weapon shredded two of the hostiles but the last one kept coming. Shoto dropped her shotgun, drew her pistol and started firing at her remaining attacker. When another hostile appeared on her flank she quickly ran out of ammunition trying to track two separate targets, but managed to take out one. Her weapon clicked dry as the last hostile was bearing down on her. Dropping her weapon, she turned to flee, making it only a few steps before the hostile leapt on her and her feed went dark, her vitals spiking red before going black.

Samuel sat in silence for nearly five minutes as the observatory thrummed with activity. After another twenty minutes the observatory was mostly empty, most of the Reaper squad leaders having left the room to prepare themselves for the coming battle.

All of them, including Samuel, knew that Grotto had invested too heavily in the mission for such an overwhelming defeat to alter their plans. The entire purpose of the penal legion had been to reveal the enemy and give the squad leaders a chance to study the enemy without risking marine lives.

The mission clock had not been altered by Command, and that meant that in a few hours the Reaper units would make planetfall and move into the city. Most all of the convict stats were black across the board, with the few red bars moving to black by the second as five thousand men and women died in the city. Saying "this is the job" seemed to Samuel an insufficient sentiment given the situation, though the marine knew that little else applied.

The penal legion had served as intended, providing Reaper Command with highly valuable intelligence that would enable the actual invasion force to be more combat effective. Though the size of the force that awaited the Reapers was as yet unknown, the hour long engagement had visibly yielded multitudes of hostile casualties, and the marines could expect to face an enemy that was at least marginally weaker than it had been previously.

With a heavy heart, Samuel stood up, removed his headset, and

left the observatory with one last glance at the mission clock. He'd known it would go badly. No salvage this big came without the cost being paid in blood.

13. METAL STORM

In the hours after the crushing defeat of the penal legion by the gun spiders Reaper Command had assumed full mission authority from the Warden Corps. Investigators and engineers had worked in conjunction with the Grotto military advisors who accompanied the mission to analyze the data collected prior to the battle and during the penal legion's failed engagement.

Command had modified the landing strategy. Instead of surrounding the city with smaller forces, the Reaper battle force would enter the city as a single fighting unit certain their superior equipment and experience would be enough to enable them to defeat the gun spiders with relative ease.

Using available intelligence from the penal legion's brief time in the city proper it had been determined that the entire city was laid out in a grid that was relatively rhomboid in nature. The layout of the streets and buildings converged upon a ziggurat pyramid with a flat top that dwarfed all of the other buildings. The Reaper force would move into the city and seize the ziggurat as priority one. Once it had been fortified they would begin conducting surveys to determine the nature of the building and any possible threats within the city beyond the spiderbots.

A tertiary objective was to determine the fate of the penal legionnaires whose corpses had been hauled away by gun spiders.

Several hours later the landing craft carrying Tango Platoon slammed into the planet's surface just outside the urban limits of the alien necropolis.

Samuel pounded out of the open bay doors, his boots crunching gravel. The marine could see the sky burning with dozens more landing craft making planetfall in nearby landing zones.

Squad Hyst formed up behind him as his gaze swept across the city and an involuntary shudder moved through him. He thought of the penal legion's defeat and found himself frustrated at the brutish strategy of simply hurling wave after wave of soldiers at an entrenched enemy.

Samuel thought that it would have been standard procedure to embed a tracking device in each of the penal legionnaires to track them from orbit. When he inquired, he was politely informed that the cost to track them was much higher than the cost of simply embedding the cheap explosives to prevent them from wandering too far. To Samuel, the desire of Grotto to save the cost of tracking was simply transferring the burden of the cost onto human beings, which he was learning more and more were Grotto's most renewable and

exploited resource.

Within minutes of planetfall the full company of nearly nine hundred Reapers had formed up by platoon and marched in tight wedges towards the heart of the city.

Tango Platoon was under the command of Boss Wynn Marsters, as had been their custom since Samuel's first day as a marine, though, for the first time, Samuel found himself in a command position as well. The name Boss Hyst still sounded odd to his ears. Samuel found himself in charge of four more lives than he was used to.

Ben had always had Samuel's back and over the years he and Patrick had shared many battles and adventures. Bianca was a solid veteran in addition to the personal relationship she and Samuel shared. Holland, despite the fact that he was the newest member of the squad, had served in Vorhold, which made him a hardened veteran in everyone's eyes.

Samuel knelt down as the battle force marched forward and ran his hand across the grooves in the street that covered the city. Now that he was on the ground and observing them with his own eyes he found that they were more disturbing to witness in person. He wasn't so sure that they were used for simple construction, and he began to get the nagging feeling that they had other uses he couldn't fathom. Ben walked past Samuel and the machine gunner nodded as he followed Samuel's gaze.

"It's like you were saying, the angles are all wrong, kind of makes my head spin," Ben said as Samuel stood and rejoined the ranks, "We're only a few clicks in and I'm getting twitchy."

"I'll feel better once we have a hardpoint," said Samuel as Squad Hyst moved through the streets towards the skyscrapers that loomed in the fog. "Those spider things are going to come from all directions when they decide to engage."

"You said it, Boss," agreed Patrick from the front of the wedge as he swept his muzzle back and forth over the perimeter ahead of them while he marched, "From what I heard at mess this morning those convicts got hammered fast."

"Bravo Tango, we're picking up a whole lot of nothing, what's your status?" a voice crackled over the com-beads, and Samuel recognized it as Boss Harker, the leader of Bravo Platoon.

"Tango Bravo, no sign of hostile forces," replied the voice of Boss Marsters, "We're only a few clicks from the first point of contact between the penal legion and the hostiles, maybe that'll stir them up."

Squad Hyst reached the place where Shoto and her legionaries had first encountered the enemy, and two thoughts occurred to him at once. The first was realizing he had forged a more profound connection to the convicts and their warden than he'd thought.

Despite being removed in orbit he had shared in their battle. The second was how odd it was that there was no evidence of their presence a mere three hours after the engagement.

"Hold up," said Samuel as he threw his clenched fist in the air. His squad responded by stopping and holding position. "I know this place. I was the squad leader for a penal platoon that engaged the hostiles right on this spot."

"Hyst, your squad is breaking formation and we just lost line of sight on you," inquired the voice of Boss Ulanti, whose squad was one street over. "Report or fall in."

"I don't see anything, sir, that's the problem. I ran ops for Line Warden Shoto and this is the corner where they engaged the hostiles." Samuel walked across the street and knelt down where Shoto had fired her shotgun. "No blood, no bodies, no shell casings. Boss, it's like they were never here."

"Copy that, we are finding no combat evidence either. Ditch your normalcy bias marines," growled the voice of Boss Marsters in the ears of Tango Platoon. "Assume that the enemy has superior technology, numerical advantage, and entrenched defenses. We are the prey until we can flip the script on them. Stay frosty, in two minutes we are going to push double-time to the ziggurat. I want a hardpoint and I want off these streets."

Tango Platoon girded up and started marching more swiftly through the streets, checking their blind corners and back-shadows as they moved. The lack of evidence that the penal legion and gun spiders ever engaged or were even present on the ground became increasingly disturbing to Samuel, the growing sense of dread began pounding in his skull.

It was as if he'd dreamed this moment, perhaps while in the darkness of his spinal injury, half remembering it as the marines plunged ever deeper into the cyclopean city.

Soon the ziggurat loomed out of the fog as they reached the base of the strange building. Like the others, it had been built of the greenish black material and had a polished smooth surface, but it was filled with deep terraces and staircases that created natural battlements.

Squad Ulanti joined Samuel's team at the base of the pyramid shaped building and at a silent gesture from her, began pulling security details. While Squad Ulanti fanned out to cover possible avenues of counter-attack, Squad Marsters marched out of an alleyway and without breaking stride pushed past the other marines and began their ascent of the pyramid.

"Squads Marsters and Hyst on me," ordered Boss Marsters as he took the lead in slinging his rifle and climbing over the first terrace,

“Ulanti will hold the door open if we need to pull out fast.”

Samuel fell in behind Harold Marr who brought up the rear of Squad Marsters with his heavy machine gun. The marines immediately discovered that the pyramid was constructed using interlocking terraces that worked to create stone trenches on each level. Samuel was positive that he wasn’t the only one who noticed the carved depressions that lined the trenches roughly twenty yards apart. As he passed by them he could see that they corresponded to the ones in the trench line on the level above them in such a way that created full coverage of the structure. When he saw the ring mounts in the base of the depressions he was positive that he was looking at gun emplacements.

The terraced levels were connected by short stairwells that allowed the marines to ascend to the next level of the pyramid. The stairwells were placed in different locations across each level, and Samuel could not help but think that this was done with tactical intent. By varying the placement of the stairs an enemy would have to take the pyramid level by level, instead of simply ascending a line of stairs all the way to the top. It appeared, so far, that the only entrance to the interior of the pyramid was at the top, creating a formidable fighting position.

Samuel could hear the radio chatter and knew that other Reaper platoons had reached the pyramid from other directions, and more marines were taking up positions on the structure. Bravo Platoon moved their full strength up the structure to support Tango Platoon as the rest of the marines took control of the first three terraced levels. It seemed that none of the Reaper Bosses were particularly interested in being exposed on the streets below, and everyone had opted to use the defenses of the structure to their advantage. Each of the bosses had advised their own group of legionnaires, and all of them had witnessed the speed and ferocity with which the penal troops were eliminated.

Though it had not been officially disseminated information, most of the bosses knew that the majority of the convicts were still alive, at least according to their monitors. The general Reaper grunts had not been officially informed, to avoid a panic. Samuel wasn’t keen to hide information from his people, but he did as he was ordered.

“Tango Bravo, snipers are seeing massive architectural shift from our vantage point mid-structure, confirm,” growled Boss Harker over the com-bead.

“Architectural shift?” asked Patrick, slinging his flamer. At a nod from Samuel, he and Bianca and hoisted themselves up using the footholds cut into the stone just beneath one of the gun mounts, “Is that even a phrase?”

“Scope it and you tell us, marine,” said Boss Marsters as he inclined his head towards Jada, “Sek get me eyes on the opposite side.”

Once perched atop the gun emplacement, Patrick turned back to accept Samuel’s hand-held viewfinder. The marine set the device against his helmet’s visor and began scanning the city. He toggled through several viewing modes until he was able to find a setting that pierced through at least some portion of the gloom. He was visibly shaken by what he saw.

“Um, Boss, you’re gonna need to see this for yourself,” muttered Patrick as he looked back at Samuel and handed the viewfinder to Bianca for a second opinion, “This is tough to describe.”

Samuel ascended the wall and squeezed into the tight space of the gun emplacement. The space seemed to be meant for one weapon and one operator, but the three marines huddled together as best they could so that Samuel could get a clear view of the city below. The marine looked through his viewfinder and gasped. It was difficult to make out completely in the fog, but it appeared as if the buildings were rearranging themselves.

Immediately, Samuel recalled the tracks he’d seen set into the streets and along the sides of the buildings, and as he watched the structures grind their way slowly into new formations he could not help but marvel at the ingenuity of it all. He had seen a great many technological wonders in his time, from the gargantuan industrial complexes of Grotto Corporation to the chaotic leviathan that was the space hulk, but this- this elegant re-shaping of the city’s layout- was both a wonder and terror to behold. A wonder of architecture, engineering, and physics, but a terror as the buildings shifted, blocking off all of the streets and creating a solid circular wall around the entire city.

Reports of the architectural shift were buzzing through the com-beads as platoon after platoon sounded off. Command ordered the Reaper force to converge on the ziggurat as a primary objective, then hold position as the tech and intelligence staff continued to monitor changes within the city.

As more and more marines arrived they began creating hasty fighting positions with their flak boards and taking up position using the building’s natural defenses. Everyone was on edge, and with good reason. This force was comprised entirely of veterans from the Reaper Corps, and all of them had seen their share of strange things. They knew from experience that on hostile salvage missions even the buildings themselves were active participants in the battle space, and the environment had to be respected as an unpredictable hostile. On most missions, though, the threat was usually some manner of

secondary explosion, toxic breach, or structural collapse, never before had the environment been so calculated in its reaction to their presence.

Grips tightened on weapons and fingers hovered over triggers as the marines waited for a fight they knew had to be coming. The three marines re-joined the squads and pressed onwards, none of them wanting to keep looking at the logic defying movements of the already disturbing buildings.

As the two squads neared the apex of the pyramid Samuel's combead began to pulse with an emergency signal. Boss Marsters looked back at Samuel and the two men locked eyes for a moment before Wynn held his hand up in a clenched fist. His gesture halted the marine's advance. He opened his hand wide to splay his fingers out and the assembled marines fanned out to pull security. They were on the second terrace from the top, without much trench to cover, so the eight marines were able to get three hundred and sixty degree coverage despite their small numbers. Samuel stood next to Boss Marsters as they switched over to the command channel.

"Reaper Ground Force Reaper Actual, massive energy surges inside the ziggurat, the signatures indicate sizeable machine components inside the structure itself," came the monotone voice of the Reaper command dispatcher, "Penetrate, neutralize, and secure. Over."

"Boss Ulanti, ascend now and meet us at the top, we're going in," said Boss Marsters as he checked the fire toggle on his rifle and switched it to three round burst, "Advance to the apex of the structure and sweep in behind us. Bravo Platoon is pulling security. Reaper Actual, Squad Marsters and Squad Hyst entering hostile structure time now."

"Roger Tango Leader," answered the crisp voice on the other end of the line.

"Reapers on me," Marsters ordered as he continued downwards, flipping on both his body lights and gun lights to illuminate the darkness below.

The marines filed one by one through the opening in the top of the ziggurat, Samuel descending just after Bianca Kade. The marine moved her gun light back and forth with trained precision, taking care to illuminate the blind corners of the staircase as it emptied into a large empty chamber. They had been sleeping together since before the conflict on Tetra Prime. Both had thought themselves simply soldiers who needed each other briefly in a few moments of weakness and battle fatigue. However, she and Samuel had re-kindled their former entanglement in these last weeks on Vorhold, both telling themselves after the horrors of downspire they needed the simple

comforts of human intimacy.

Neither claimed to want a relationship, both had spouses back on Baen 6, though it was becoming clear that something more had grown between them. Samuel knew that it would affect his judgment in battle, possibly hers as well, even though Jada and George had seemed to make it work for several years, neither of them were additionally distracted by the guilt of betrayal.

Here he was, on some distant world fighting to get his family away from the grinding society of Grotto, all the while soiling the very vows that bound him to his wife.

He loved Sura, deeply, and yet as he entered the chamber alongside Bianca he knew that if it came to it he would die to keep her alive, and not just because they were military comrades.

He and Bianca had stood together against the guns of Helion and the claws of downspire, seen friends die, there was a bond in that he couldn't share with Sura. No matter how much he loved her or how much she struggled to understand, there would always be that dark place in him, and only a fellow marine could burn away the shadows of it. Bianca had been the one to articulate that particular disconnect between herself and her husband. She had only married in the last few years, after Tetra Prime, but already she saw that being a marine was tearing unavoidable holes in her relationship.

He mused that it would be easier just to die down here, and leave Sura to find a new life with a better husband, one more worthy of her trust. He knew that was the coward's path, he had come too far to just lie down and die, regardless how much of a mess he'd made of his marriage and his own heart.

Scuttling sounds snapped Samuel's mind back into focus and he raised his rifle toward where he thought the sound had come from. So did the other marines, but each of them aimed their weapons in different directions.

With all of their lights brought to bear it became clear that the chamber walls were covered in hieroglyphs, laser carved with high levels of detail. There were multiple archways, each appearing to angle downwards.

None of the marines could make sense of what they were seeing. Many of the images seemed to depict the gun spiders that they'd seen outside, along with humanoid looking bodies stacked atop one another in what looked to be either mass graves or perhaps some kind of assembly line. As the scuttling sounds returned, Samuel noticed another glyph of what looked to be a very tall man with long hair standing atop what he assumed to be a facsimile of the ziggurat itself. Just below the glyph was an open archway, the darkness leading deeper into the tunnel broken by a dull-green glow. It reminded him

of the half-light in downspire, that sort of ambient illumination that seemed to come from nowhere.

Boss Marsters, who stood in the center of the chamber, slung his rifle and pulled Vol's pistol from the holster on his hip.

"Circle up, defensive pattern," came Wynn's cold voice over the com-bead. The words had barely left his mouth and the nine other marines had taken up their positions around him, a formation which allowed them to have at least one or more guns covering each archway.

Boss Marsters rapidly used the revolver to fire a flare round down the length of each dark corridor. As the bright red rounds sped through, they briefly illuminated several gun spiders that had been slinking across the walls and ceiling of the passageways. As the rounds impacted in the distance they could see more hostiles gathering. Boss Marsters quickly holstered his pistol and unslung his rifle racking the slide.

"Weapons free, three round bursts only," ordered the platoon leader as he raised his rifle and spat a burst down the corridor to his left, and the impact of his bullets sent sparks flying as they ripped into one of the gun spiders. "We have dominant position, bottleneck them and no explosives. Pour it on people."

The marines began firing. There were only ten of them, but they were able to output a tremendous amount of firepower. Harold and Ben each held an archway alone, and their sustained fire chewed through the gun spiders before the hostiles had time to lock in their firing solutions. Both machine gunners could see other gun spiders down the passageways, holding back as if they'd realized they were walking into a kill zone. The other passageways were not so easily managed, and several of the gun spiders were able to train their weapons on the marines and return fire.

Samuel hurled himself to the left as tracer fire tore through the empty air where he'd been standing. The marine landed hard on his shoulder, but managed to return fire from his prone position. Samuel wasn't sure if he'd hit the enemy. His salvo pushed one of the spiders away from its partial cover in the shadows and Bianca was able to punch several bursts through its chest, causing it to collapse to the floor in a heap of dented metal and leaking fluids.

Other marines were not so lucky. Samuel heard the shout from one of the marines in Squad Marsters as hard rounds from the gun spiders riddled him with ragged holes. Holland fired with his rifle pulled tight to his hip and reached down to help Samuel up.

No sooner had the marine gained his feet than two rounds struck Holland in the leg, one shearing off a piece of his shin guard and the other pulping his right kneecap. The medic howled and collapsed,

threatening to pull Samuel down with him. The marine was able to keep his footing and hold onto Holland to prevent him from slamming down face first.

Samuel took a knee and ignored the fight to focus on digging through Holland's squad med-kit for the right tools to seal the wound. The round had completely disintegrated the medic's knee. The marine trusted that Bianca would cover him and found the synth skin as well as a massive pressure bandage.

Observing the effects of the machine race's bullets, Samuel was deeply disturbed at the level of technological advancement. Judging by the wound patterns, the rounds were capable of piercing both armor and then flowering within the flesh once it was through.

Modern soldiers, even well-funded elites like Imago and his Folken, were only able to have one sort of round or the other, because of the way the bullets had to be manufactured. For a bullet to have the kind of on-board data to determine when it had punched through armor and then through flesh so that it could trigger a flowering effect, was beyond current technology. Certainly, there were large artillery rounds capable of similar feats, though for each and every round to effectively be a 'smart round' with onboard secondary propulsion systems, couldn't even begin to be cost effective on such a scale as small arms ammunition.

Samuel finished dressing the wound, having successfully distracted himself from the battle around him with his musings on the enemy projectiles. Moments later he was back in the fight. Bianca had stood just ahead of him, placing her body between him and Holland, and had nearly emptied the second magazine that she'd taped together with her first.

Samuel fired from his crouching position, adding his controlled bursts to Bianca's, giving her time to reload when she went dry. Within seconds the furious firefight tapered off, and after a full minute of fighting the gun spiders had withdrawn from the passageways. Without needing to be told everyone began reloading, checking each other for injuries, and policing their casualties while others in the group pulled security.

"Boss, I saw one of them dragging a legionnaire across the back of the passage, just like out in the city, why would they do that?" asked Spencer over his shoulder as he reloaded his rifle and kept a wary eye on the threatening shadows in the passageway, "I thought they were just machines."

"This is an alien world, Green, they might be more than machines, we have no way of knowing until we secure this objective," Boss Marsters said flatly. He looked up and gave a curt nod to Boss Lucinda and her squad as they descended the stairs, followed by

Gamma and Whiskey Platoon, “Boss Ulanti, coms aren’t working well down here, status on the exterior?”

“Whatever energy field the entrance to this structure is emitting must baffle sound in addition to killing coms,” answered Lucinda as her squad and the other platoons spread out to help pull security on the room, “We’ve been repelling counter-assaults by the gun spiders in earnest since you descended. The last fifteen minutes have been rather colorful, looks like for you too.”

“They could have overrun us if they’d come in force,” Boss Marsters replied while he took stock of the now sizeable assault force. “This was just a probe; we can expect to encounter stiff resistance the further we push.”

“We’ll follow your lead, Tango,” said Boss Uric of Gamma Platoon, eliciting a series of nods from the bosses of Whiskey platoon. “We spent enough time downspire to know how bad the Basin shift was. If we’re going to go down another fight-hole I’m glad it’s with you people.”

“So it is, then,” said Boss Marsters, who looked around the chamber for a moment, then began issuing orders. “Hyst, get some repelling line and secure Holland to the telescoping stretcher in the squad kit. Boss Uric, I need your man over there, Gunderson, to haul my medic back to the surface. Gunderson, once you’re up top find Boss Harker of Bravo and tell him I need at least one of his squads to come down and hold this chamber, preferably the whole platoon if he isn’t too pressed by the enemy. The rest of us are going to form up by squads and secure this objective.”

Boss Marsters walked around the chamber as everyone separated by squad. Gunderson started his strenuous climb up the steps dragging Holland on the stretcher and Samuel joined what remained of his squad.

“I wonder which passage we’re going to end up taking, they all look the same,” muttered Ben to Samuel and Abasi Hondo, one of the Reaper veterans from a different fleet who had mustered out as part of Tango Platoon to fill out the positions opened in Squad Ulanti by their casualties on Vorhold. “We’re flying blind here.”

“Your com-bead is open, Takeda, though you make a fair point,” said Boss Marsters as he approached the marines. Averting his eyes, Ben mumbled an apology.

“We have five passages to choose from, and each one of them is crawling with gun spiders and who knows what else. We have enough squads to push two down four passages. Last passage has to be one squad. Prybar, that’s on you. Take Hondo from Squad Ulanti to replace Holland. Get it done, marines.”

With that the assembled marines began moving out as Boss

Marsters called out squad marching orders and directed them to push forward into their respective passages.

When the passageway for Squad Hyst was pointed out, Samuel shouldered his rifle and started cautiously moving forward, with Ben at his side and the rest of the squad following them. Samuel noticed just as he entered the passage that he'd ended up being assigned the one that had the glyphs with all of the stacked bodies and the lone figure.

The sight of those glyphs was burned into his mind, and he found it very difficult to shake off the sense of dread that crept steadily into his awareness. The marine took a deep breath and loosened his death grip on the rifle, doing his best to find his battle calm as he reminded himself that he'd survived everything the universe had thrown at him so far.

Ben caught the movement first. He squeezed the trigger of his heavy machine gun to send a salvo of rounds down the passageway and into the chest of a gun spider that had been attempting to flank them by clinging to the ceiling during its approach.

The marines followed Samuel's lead as he sprinted forward, keeping his rifle at the ready, not wanting to be caught in the kill zone and suffering the same fate as the gun spiders that first attacked them. The squad poured out of the passageway and into a smaller chamber, also covered in glyphs from ceiling to floor. Ben's heavy machine gun cleared out two more gun spiders as the rest of the squad bracketed them with rifle fire and drove them into Takeda's cone of fire.

There were two archways leading out of the chamber, one sloping up and another sloping down. Samuel paused in his advance to study the glyphs, hoping that he could find something more to go on besides which way was up and which was down. As he pondered, another gun spider attacked from the downward sloping passageway, managing to score a few grazing hits on Hondo before Ben's heavy gun tore it apart.

"Prybar?" asked Bianca in between bursts of fire. She and Hondo drilled a gun spider that burst, gun firing, from the shadows of the upward sloping passageway.

"Tricky room to get caught in if they come at us with more than one or two at a time," Samuel spat.

"Aye, Boss," agreed Hondo through gritted teeth as he swiftly injected himself with stimulants and emptied a tear-away packet of sealant over his minor wounds. "Not enough guns to hold it from two sides."

"Down it is, then," grumbled Samuel, annoyed that he was essentially making a flip of the coin as to which passage might lead to the center. Now that they were inside the ziggurat the angles seemed

all wrong, going down felt like it might actually be up. His body was betraying him, and he could see it in the posture of his squad, the physics was wrong here.

They encountered more gun spiders as they traversed through a number of smaller chambers. As they went deeper into the ziggurat it felt to all of them as if they'd fallen into a whirlpool of sorts. The deeper they went, the more they felt they were going on a lazy spiral leading them towards the center, but not necessarily downward. It was as if the ziggurat was tremendously larger on the inside than it was on the outside.

After a grinding journey and multiple minor injuries, they felt they had finally reached the bottom, or at least the core; their senses could no longer be trusted. The passageway emptied into an enormous, high ceilinged chamber.

It became obvious to Samuel as he stepped out, that apparently all the passages ended at this chamber as other marines appeared in the openings that ran around the perimeter of the huge room. Fewer marines exited the passageway system than had entered it, and there were several more walking casualties like Harold. Samuel assumed the other groups encountered just as much resistance as his squad had. Samuel could see that Harold had taken some hits on his side and shoulder, though the rest of the squad looked none the worse for wear.

On the opposite side of the chamber, Samuel could see that many of the other squads had emerged from the passages and in moments three platoons of Reapers closed in on the center of the chamber. For a moment they all just stood and stared, every marine frozen in horror at the sight before them.

Hundreds of stone tables, made of the same material as the rest of the structures in the city were lined up across the floor, and upon each table lay the broken corpse of a penal legionnaire. Protruding from each of their clavicles was a thin black cable that snaked down the tables and across the floor in dozens of neat rows.

"What the…" Someone's voice crackled in Samuel's com-bead.

Samuel, Bianca, Hondo and Ben moved down the rows, aiming their weapons first at the tables, then the walls and ceilings. Samuel looked to his right and saw Boss Ulanti and Spencer Green moving up as well. Further down the line were Harold and Jada Sek, the former of which had slung his heavy machine gun and was holding his service pistol.

To a man, every eye followed the lines of cables, every weapon gradually aiming toward the raised structure they led to.

The cables leading from the legionnaire corpses flowed up the terraced steps, slowly merging with each other until there were no

more than a few dozen larger cables that reached the center of the platform.

Atop the platform, made of the alien stone, was an item that could only be described as a throne. Seated in the chair was a humanoid machine that appeared to be made of an amalgamation of wires, metal plates, and pale flesh. Its face was bestial and savage looking, and disturbingly, reminded Samuel of Ben's grim visage, a death's head image that he knew would haunt his dreams for the rest of his life.

The cables plugged into the back of its monstrous head, making it appear to have a flowing mane of hair instead of cords connecting it to all of the dead legionnaires.

Samuel was the first to reach the platform and as he placed his boot on the first step he could see a pulse of green hued energy pass through the stone steps and up to the throne.

The cyborg's eyes snapped open and burned a brilliant yellow, as if its eyes were actually heat vents for some furnace deep within its body and not lights at all. The marine felt as though it stared straight into the core of his being, and had heard his inner dialogue.

Opening its mouth, an inhuman, ear splitting sound roared from it, causing the marines to cover their ears and draw back.

All across the chamber the hundreds of cables attached to the legionnaires broke loose, falling to the floor with a clatter and every corpse sat up in unison. The cyborg's voice boomed once more and the animated legionnaires climbed from their tables and stood.

The machine stood from its throne, the segmented cables breaking away with angry hisses, as the monstrosity rose to its full height, towering over the Reapers at nearly ten feet tall.

The corpses stood motionless, the aim of the marines wavering between the legionnaires and the cyborg.

Samuel could not tear his eyes away from the burning gaze of the cyborg. He knew that he stood in the presence of intelligence both ancient and terrible, one beyond human comprehension.

Wynn Marsters broke the tension with two powerful words, and unleashed a storm.

"*Kill it!*"

Half of the marines were frozen in place, their minds too shocked by the chamber full of animated legionnaires and the titan machine to react, but the other half opened fire and in seconds the chamber thundered with the sounds of the battle.

Samuel felt as if his limbs were made of lead. No matter how much his mind screamed at his body to obey his commands he stood frozen in place, his gaze held by the machine. All around him marines shouted and fired, some at the cyborg and others the standing corpses.

Dozens of rounds pinged off of the metal plating of the cyborg's body, a few managing to sink into small patches of exposed flesh or unprotected cabling, but they appeared to have no effect.

The cyborg roared once more and the corpses suddenly exploded into action, surging forward as one body to engage the marines hand-to-hand.

The sound of Bianca's shouts and her gun firing behind him finally snapped Samuel out of his fugue.

A legionnaire collapsed in a bloody heap as Bianca riddled him with bullets. Samuel joined her in gunning down a second one as the legionnaires charged up the steps. The marine was shocked at how many rounds it took to bring the already dead hostile to the ground. He could see that several Reapers had been overpowered by the reckless berserkers.

The marines were screaming as the legionnaire corpses crawled over them, overwhelming them with sheer numbers, stripping away their armor with bare hands so that they could rip into the flesh beneath with clawed fingers and teeth. Samuel saw a legionnaire pick up a marine's discarded rifle, raising it to his shoulder and shooting through the melee at other Reapers.

Corpses wielding firearms was more than Samuel could handle, and a primal hate rose up from his belly and raged in his brain. This was unnatural, unknown, and an abomination. More than anything he wanted to do as he was told and kill the filth.

Kill all of them.

Samuel snapped his own rifle to his shoulder and began firing with his iron sights, letting his instincts take over and allowing his training and experience with the weapon do the work. The marine had never fully recovered psychologically from the events downspire on Vorhold, and he rarely used his digital scope. Plenty of marines in the chamber with him, standing on the platform steps above the general melee, were using the scopes to devastating effect, yet he could not bring himself to trust it.

More noises joined the cacophony as Ben and the two heavy gun operators from Gamma and Whiskey platoon cut loose with their rigs, spitting streams of high velocity rounds that schythed through the legionnaires.

The gunners, all veterans and masters of their weapons, knew better than to attempt to engage the enemy while there were so many hostiles in close quarters engagements with the first firing line of marines. The heavies shouldered their way through the rapidly forming Reaper battle lines so that they could pour on the firepower without much risk of hitting any friendlies.

Before Samuel's rifle clicked dry he could see that the marines

had managed to close ranks and form a crude battle line at the base of the platform. Several marines had been torn to pieces by the legionnaires or been gunned down using scavenged rifles. Now that they had a firing line and three heavy gunners, the tide was changing from a pitched melee to a veritable slaughter. Samuel had already emptied his first magazine, so the marine took a knee and fished out another magazine.

"Reloading!" shouted Samuel as he slotted in a magazine while Patrick moved to stand between the kneeling marine and the battle in front of them.

When Samuel raised his head and stood, he saw the horrific conflict occurring at the center of the platform. While he and most of the other marines had been focused on holding back the grim tide of reanimated legionnaires, a handful of others had pressed upwards to engage the cyborg.

Samuel knew he'd turned to face the corpses out of fear of the creature before him, and it was only once he saw the corpses fighting and dying that he had found the power to lash out. Most of the other marines had reacted like Samuel, turning from an unknowable and mind-numblingly powerful enemy to battle a lesser, though no less horrific, enemy.

A select few Reapers had instead, mounted an attack against the titan machine, for all the good it had done.

The cyborg had fully detached itself from the cables and held both of its arms up, clawed fingers spread out to generate what appeared to be some kind of energy force field.

Jada Sek and Boss Ulanti stood shoulder to shoulder as they took turns slamming the shield with sustained burst fire, one shooting while the other reloaded. Boss Harker was on the opposite side of the platform, peppering the shield with single shots, probing different parts of the spherical shield, searching for a weak point. Virginia and Boss Marsters, along with two marines from Whiskey Platoon, were also pouring on the firepower.

A lone marine from Gamma Platoon was pressing forward, firing only intermittently. Just moving was a struggle the closer any of the marines got to the cyborg and its shield. Boss Marsters began to march forward as well. As if they had all been waiting for his command to join the lone marine, the entire group pushed forward. They were buffeted by the energy wash of the shield. To Samuel, it felt as if they were trying to march through a heavy wind, using all of their strength to push on.

The cyborg's shield shuddered with impacts as the power of their weapons hit it harder and harder the closer they got, giving the swirling sphere of energy less time to react and demanding that it

expend more and more power to keep the projectiles at bay.

Suddenly the cyborg lowered its left hand and the sphere was bisected as the entire left side dissipated. Several rounds struck the cyborg, most bouncing off of its metal skin, but some tearing away at the exposed flesh. In the blink of an eye the titan's left arm shot straight up and its fist clenched.

The gesture seemed superfluous until flashing spheres of energy emerged from the air surrounding it and shot away shearing four marines, including Boss Harker, into cauterized hunks of armored meat. The grisly spheres crackled with energy as they ripped through the marines, leaving the bodies to fall into pieces on the platform before the balls of light blinked back out of existence.

The cyborg opened its left hand and the shield was whole again. However, now all of them could see that whatever energy source the creature was accessing must be running low, as the shield was wavering.

The marine's advance did not slow, a testament not only to their training, but to the horrors they had witnessed in their many years of service. Every Reaper on the mission was a veteran and they kept shooting as they closed in.

Twice more the cyborg opened its shield to obliterate marines with the deadly spheres even as its body was punished by hails of bullets every time it lashed out. They were paying with lives to damage the creature.

It seemed incapable of adapting its tactics, as if the willingness of the marines to press on despite their grievous casualties did not register in its mind. It simply seemed incapable of comprehending the willing sacrifices that the Reapers were making to grind down its defenses and tear at its body, a few bullets and a life at a time.

With a blast of energy that knocked all of the marines back a step, the shield finally gave out. Samuel bumped into Bianca and Patrick, surprised, not realizing they had followed him up the steps.

With another bellowing roar, the titan straightened both arms and fisted its hands. Dozens of crackling spheres burst from the platform in a nightmare swarm, tearing through legionnaires and marines alike in an explosion of screams and blood.

Behind him, Bianca grunted as she collapsed to the steps, her right leg completely removed at the knee and her left shoulder simply gone, her arm hanging loosely by a few strands of cooked muscle. The wounds smoked as they were cauterized by the raw power of the energy spheres that had caused them.

Samuel leapt back instinctively as his combat rifle was melted in half by a sphere directly in front of him. The heat damage sensors in his helmet blared alarms as much of his armor bubbled and peeled

away. Next to him, Patrick was silent as the pieces that were left of his body smacked wetly upon the platform steps.

Samuel gaped at the smoking corpse of his friend and comrade of the last six years, then back to Bianca as the woman he'd grown to love went into shock convulsions. All around him marines were dying or already dead.

Without conscious thought, Samuel ripped his boarding knife from its sheath and charged straight at the cyborg.

Before the titan machine could react, Samuel plunged the wide blade deep into an exposed area of flesh in the creature's side.

The cyborg howled in what Samuel hoped was pain. It attempted to rake him with its claws, only to have its attack interrupted by Boss Ulanti slamming into it from the back, ramming her own knife into its body.

As the two marines repeatedly stabbed at the creature, Jada Sek leapt into the fray and began slashing it with her knife. More marines joined her, all of them clinging like burrs, despite the titan's efforts to dislodge them. All of them hacking and slashing and screaming, in a frenzy of anger that was almost madness.

The lone marine who had first started up the steps fell to his knees as the cyborg used its claws to tear his mid-section into ribbons. The titan opened its mouth, but before it could make a sound, Boss Marsters appeared atop the heap of attacking marines and drove the point of his blade through one of the beast's eye sockets.

The pulse of energy powering the creature ceased instantly, collapsing the mighty machine and sending the marines tumbling down the platform with it.

The remaining legionnaires collapsed in boneless heaps to the floor.

Samuel was unconscious when he landed at the base of the platform, tangled in the body of the titan with the other marines. By the time he started to come around the Reapers had been reinforced by more marines, who worked quickly to attend the wounded and secure the area.

Samuel lay on his back as an unknown medic pulled away his armor, skin and body glove melted to the armor in places, and began treating the burns. Samuel rolled his head to the side and saw other marines carrying Bianca away on a stretcher. She was horribly mangled, but Samuel was able to slip back into unconsciousness knowing that she was at least alive.

14. TERMINAL INJURIES

Once back aboard the tug, much to their disappointment and frustration, the battle weary Reaper cadre was bluntly informed during their debriefing that Grotto Corporation had determined, based on intelligence and evidence gathered, that the Reaper force was not to be deployed on extended salvage duty of the alien site.

It had been decided by the Board of Executives and their advisors that further study was required before any salvage ops were to begin. Surprisingly, though the marines had been denied the several months of hazard wages performing the salvage, each marine was awarded the promised completion bonus. The Reaper fleet was en route back to Baen 6 within the hour

It was hard to absorb, but Samuel finally had the money to wipe out his debts, a wife to remarry, expatriate from Grotto Corporation, and still have enough left to stake a homestead somewhere on the frontier. Despite the joy and relief this brought him, after stripping his armor away and cleaning up, rather than celebrate his good fortune, he went to begin his vigil in med bay.

Samuel was there when Bianca Kade awoke from surgery. He knew from experience that a familiar face was important when a marine first returned from the black. Boss Marsters had once again exercised his privilege as their platoon leader to make medical decisions for one of his troopers.

The doctors had installed a high end Augur brand prosthetic knee joint. However, keenly aware of the tremendous financial impact of non-covered procedures, Wynn opted for Bianca's actual leg prosthetic to be the basic metal and synth-flesh limb covered by the Reaper health plan. He had done the same for her arm and as Samuel held her human hand while she slept, he couldn't help but think of Mags as he looked at the crude machine arm. It reminded him of the cyborg hostile they'd defeated planetside, Patrick's grisly death, and the horrible deaths of so many others.

Samuel lowered his head and closed his eyes as he listened to her breathe. Suddenly she squeezed his hand making Samuel raise his head. He made no effort to hide the fact that he'd been weeping.

"The longer we do this the less of ourselves we become," whispered Bianca as she touched Samuel's face with her new arm and it was cold on his skin.

"Then let's get out while we can," said Samuel, leaning closer to look in her eyes. He gripped both of Bianca's hands in his own. "If we stay we'll either die or turn into people like Marsters or Ulanti."

Samuel paused, closing his eyes briefly, then charging on. “My family is on Pier 16, I know it’s crazy, but come with me. It’ll be messy, but we’ll figure it out.”

Bianca shook her head. “Sam, I can’t afford it, not for at least a few more years.” There was a hint of reproach in her voice. “The medical bills and expatriation fee would clean me out. I’d have nothing to live on. Not to mention my husband’s bond and expat fee. I’m not leaving him behind, Sam, and before you say you’ve got it, don’t, because you have your own family to worry about.” Bianca blinked back tears and her voice quaked with both anger and grief as she spoke.

“Respect me,” Bianca said, “and respect yourself, Prybar.” A new edge of hardness crept into her voice and her expression. She opened and closed her new hand as if truly experiencing it for the first time. “Samuel, Get your family off that station and live a better life.”

After that neither of them had much to say and they sat in awkward silence for a few moments more, simply holding each other by the hand. Eventually Samuel took a deep breath and stood up, letting her hand slip free. He looked down at Bianca and forced a smile.

“This is the job,” he said in a choked voice.

Bianca forced a smile of her own and nodded. Her features softened as she watched Samuel turn around and leave the ward. Lifting her new metal hand again, she flexed the fingers and sighed. “This is the job.”

As Samuel walked down the corridor he saw Ben leaning up against a wall nearby. He fell in step with Samuel as they continued towards the mess hall for the pre-night cycle meal.

“Want to talk about it?” asked Ben in his cold, digital voice.

“It’s done. Whatever we had is over,” Samuel said as they walked, “Doesn’t make it any easier, but I have to keep moving forward. I’ve got a family, a wife. I’m walking into a new life where I’m not getting shot at every other day.” Samuel snorted in disgust, “Not that getting shot at is an excuse for infidelity.”

“Mags would say it is what it is,” Ben responded, “She’d probably also throw out some clichés about battlefield romance, keeping war and home separate, or whatever. Boss was full of that kind of crap.”

“That she was,” laughed Samuel as they entered the mess hall, but somehow it made him feel a little better hearing Ben say that, even in his wrecked voice. “What about you Ben? Staying in?”

“Nothing for me back on Baen, no family but Samuel Hyst and his love triangle.” Ben slugged Samuel in the shoulder playfully. “Nah, I’m going to go after another merc coin, try to get into the Merchants

Militant. You probably haven't heard since you've been here all day, but more planets and systems are showing up on long range scans.

Whatever we did down on that planet seems to have started a chain reaction. More and more of necrospace on this side of the Line is starting to chart. Where there are new worlds there will be wars fought over who gets to own them. I bet there'll be hired armies duking it out before we even get back home. Maybe I'll find our boy, Imago, and give my resume to the Folken, become a wargir." Ben's accompanying digital laugh sounded like two saw blades dragging against each other.

"That'll be the day," Samuel said, picking up his tray while Ben walked next to him, having already sipped his nutrients for the cycle.

"Well, Harold has some Blotto left over from Vorhold; we're throwing a little going away party for you and Tillman." Ben led Samuel over to the Tango tables. "She's mustering out, too. Going back to Baen."

"What's her plan?" asked Samuel as he smiled and waved at the marines who waited with glasses held high as they toasted those who took early retirement.

"I think she's going to join the unionist movement back on Baen 6," scoffed Ben, "For all the good that'll do, we haven't had labor unions for centuries, they're fighting an uphill battle."

"We're Reapers, Ben," Samuel replied, accepting a glass from Harold. "That's what we do."

"Drink up, Boss," said Harold. He raised his glass in a toast, "To your last day as hard meat."

Everyone laughed and drained their glasses, ready to forget their troubles for a few blissful hours.

15. PIER 16

Samuel had walked the bustling corridors of the space station for what seemed like hours. His reunion with Orion had been achingly sweet, and even though he felt as if he hardly knew the boy, Samuel was overjoyed to be with his son for good. Sura had wept when he'd stepped off the transport shuttle and at first she would not approach him, then as Orion pulled at her arm she finally embraced her husband.

It had been strange for Samuel to be there, surrounded by his family and on the precipice of a new life. He was no longer a Reaper, though as yet he was not anything else. As a man raised within Grotto culture, Samuel Hyst defined himself by his work, so without a rifle in his grip and nothing to replace it, he had felt as empty as his hands. Still, Samuel began to realize that emptiness held vast potential. That he was, in fact, not empty, but for the first time in his life was experiencing the feeling of true freedom.

The feeling did not last long.

The courier found Samuel on one of the lower decks watching the starships come and go as they either delivered or picked up cargo from the many docks on the station.

Samuel signed the courier's datapad and unrolled the ultrathin wafer of printed information. He read it once, twice, and then a third time before he let it fall from his numb fingers to the floor.

> #Message Orbital 65.73SH#
> Boss Samuel Hyst, Tango Platoon
>
> We regret to inform you that your Expatriation Application #223.01SH has been declined, pursuant to Reaper Code 1627, paragraph 35, which explicitly states that:
>
> During a declared emergency-state-of-war, no active duty Reaper shall be allowed to resign his or her post for a term not less than two years and not in excess of five years from date of the declaration unless and until Grotto Corporation deems the emergency-state-of-war lifted.
>
> An emergency-state-of-war has been declared by the Board of Executives, effective as of thirty-seven hours prior to this message timestamp. Your expatriation payment has been returned to your personal account, less processing and administration fees.
>
> You are to report to your nearest duty station for orders

and transport within twelve hours of receipt of this citizenship status update.

Have a nice day and Grotto thanks you for your service.

#REAPER Desk – Offices of the Citizen Actuary#

The End

16. UNTIL THAT DAY

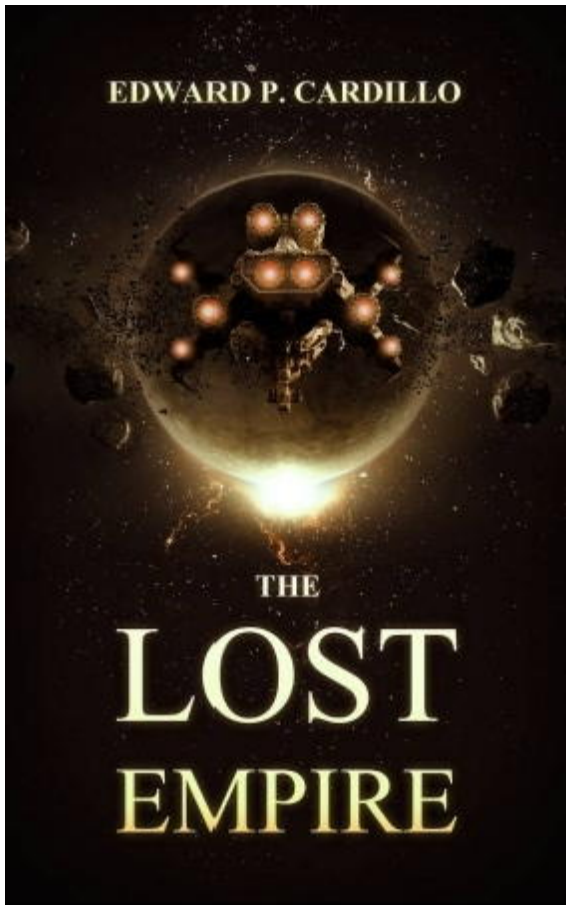
A Note from the Author

Thank you for taking this grim adventure alongside the Reapers of Grotto Corporation. Victory in this corporate age is difficult to define, no matter who is left standing, and this story is far from over. Corporate executives maneuver for position and mercenary armies prepare themselves for the inevitable bloodshed that follows the discovery of new wealth.

Stay alert for the next installment of the Necrospace series, where the journey will continue for some, and end for others.

This is the job

Read on for a free sample of *The Lost Empire*



Chapter 1

Command Carrier Dominance

Affiliation: Feng Empire

Fleet Admiral Fengus Utang sat in his chair on the battle bridge of his command carrier, assimilating thousands of points of data as they were gathered, as filtered by Captain Paxo Klingu.

“Sir, our battle group is exiting spacefold in the Humana System.”

“How far out?”

“One point seven three nine kilaparsecs, sir.”

Admiral Utang was about to initiate the final stage of his intergalactic scourge against the United Intergalactic Coalition. One by one, in his march across the known galaxies, overlooking the Uncharted Sectors, he had led the Feng Empire in its conquest to reclaim the glory of the Old Empire. In a vicious campaign, he toppled world after world, nation after nation, whittling away the overstretched United Intergalactic Coalition. From the Vampiri to the Homunculi, each member of the UIC was outmatched by the superior armada of the Feng.

The invasion of Humana, the seat of the United Intergalactic Coalition, was the end game in this great Intergalactic War 4.0.

“The Humani have detected our arrival, sir.”

This was to be suspected as the deep cold of space made it impossible to mask the heat signatures of large vessels and battle groups.

“Captain, release the hunter-killers.” These hunter-killers were the first ships in the history of armada vessels to utilize the dark matter of space to conceal themselves from detection. Admiral Utang watched as they entered the Humani battle group’s outer screen, circumventing detection. In turn, they gathered data on enemy positions and relayed them back.

“Have them take out the passive Humani scouts,” ordered Admiral Utang.

The on-screen display showed the frail Humani scout satellites take fire and explode, as they were designed for detection rather than engagement. Within thirty micros, the outer screen of the Humani defense forces had been eliminated.

“Sir, the hunter-killers are breaching the Humani’s inner screen.”

“Mobilize the battleships and dreadnaughts just outside the outer screen, and dispatch Warmonger squadrons.” Every squadron in the invasion fleet launched and approached the now non-existent Humani outer screen, outnumbering the Humani Vortex fighters in the inner screen two-to-one.

As the Feng hunter-killers breached the inner screen, the Humani Vortex defenders buzzed around blindly, groping out into the cold darkness with their sensors, desperate to detect the smallest heat signature.

The stealth vessels, rather than engaging, reached out with their own sensors, reporting back on the Humani Vortex positions and formations. The quantum computers of the Dominance extrapolated data from prior Humani encounters, assessing the threat axis of the Humani defense forces.

One of the stealth vessels took a fatal hit, the explosion ripping through its cloak of dark matter. It quickly became a lifeless husk, its crew drifting out of its gaping wounds into the vacuum of space.

"Sir, the Humani have dispatched hunter-killers."

Admiral Utang was stoic, entirely expecting this.

"Mobilize countermeasures."

He and the captain watched as the wave of battleships and dreadnaughts breached the outer screen. Cloaked ships traded fire, desperately trying to get a fix on the others' positions. More Feng stealth vessels were neutralized by the cloaked Humani hunter-killers. Those few remaining switched from reconnaissance to engagement out of self-preservation, taking a dozen or so Vortex fighters with them as they rejoined the Aether.

"Sir, we have lost all hunter-killers," said Captain Klingu.

However, Admiral Utang was unfazed. This was war and was to be expected.

The Vortex fighters pulled up in battle formations to the edge of the inner screen, waiting to greet the Feng battleships and dreadnaughts. Their sensors scanned the cold depths of the battlespace, targeting systems and weapons running hot.

"Release the chaff," Admiral Utang ordered.

The battleships released a cloud of radioactive nanites, lighting up the targeting systems of the Vortex formations and the cloaked Humani hunter-killers. Their targeting systems confused, registering vast clouds of bogeys, the Vortex formations retreated back into the inner screen.

The nanites swept over the battlespace, latching onto the cloaked hunter-killers, causing the Humani stealth vessels to register as silhouettes on the Feng scanners. Although the cloaked ships remained below the thermo-gradient, the effect was like throwing a sheet over an invisible man.

"Send in the fighter squadrons," ordered Admiral Utang.

The Feng armada targeted the revealed Humani hunter-killers and engaged, neutralizing them in short order. The Humani and Feng fighter squadrons charged the battlespace.

Tactical maneuvers broke down into chaos as the squadrons of fighters swarmed each other, pitching and rolling, engaging in zero-gravity dogfighting.

The Humani fighter pilots were superior in matters of reaction time and tactics, and it showed as they made quick work of the Feng squadrons. Captain Klingu viewed the battle on screen with great apprehension. However, Admiral Utang knew that the Feng only needed to whittle down the Vortex screen enough, and that was exactly what they accomplished.

“Sir, the Humani are transmitting for reinforcements. Forces from Earth are entering spacefold.”

Admiral Utang sneered. “The Humani must be desperate if they are enlisting the help of the Humans.”

The Humans were the last race to enter the United Intergalactic Coalition. Their abilities were limited, and their training was cursory and inadequate due to the demands of war and the urgency to bolster UIC forces with numbers.

The Humans were an embarrassment, losing every skirmish in the war to the Feng, even to the lesser races of the Feng Empire. Therefore, they were largely relegated to supply chains, piloting transport vessels carrying munitions and parts as well as food.

Utang’s sneer morphed into a smug grin. “More target practice for our ships.”

The arrival of Human transports would serve as nothing more than a nuisance, putting off the inevitable Feng victory.

The Feng dreadnaughts entered the inner screen, pummeling the Vortex fighters and initiating offensive ECM, jamming the planet’s communications, cutting off the Humani from what was left of their crumbling forces.

This was a glorious day for the Feng Empire, and total victory was imminent. The Feng believed in ‘eating what you killed,’ and they were about to feast upon the remains of a decadent and obsolete political-economic union.

Once the dreadnaughts and the Feng second and third waves neutralized the Humani HVU’s, Admiral Utang would release battalions of the dreaded cyborg Cybion warriors onto the planet. While the Humani pilots may have been superior, their marines were woefully inferior to the ruthless Cybions. Flesh would always yield to metal, and the Cybions were killing machines, designed to instill fear and end lives with brutal efficiency.

Captain Klingu’s eyes went wide. “Sir, the Humans are exiting spacefold.”

“Prepare to engage,” said Admiral Utang.

“Sir, they are opening a wormhole exactly onto our coordinates.”

“What?”

“They are going to unfold in the dead center of our battle group.”

“Idiots!” was all Admiral Utang could utter before an opening in Spacetime breached the center of his command carrier…

The lights went on in the Aether chamber, and Captain Mongo Utang watched as the display of the Dominance battle bridge evaporated before his very eyes. He had been immersed in a ghost memory of the key battle in the last Intergalactic War as told through

his father's experience.

He fought his body's urge to choke up, his face contorting with rage, as hot tears welled up in his eyes. 'Frakking Humans!'

This was not the first time that Captain Utang had reviewed his father's final hours in battle during the Intergalactic War. He had only been a child on his home planet when he received news of his father's demise.

The Feng were raised as warriors, and the prospect of a 'beautiful death' in battle was welcomed rather than feared. However, to die at the bungling hands of Human cargo pilots, from an unwitting suicide mission that inadvertently wiped out the High Valued Units of the Feng invasion force, not to mention their key fleet commander, signaling a turning point in the war, was shameful and embarrassing.

With their most talented tactician gone, the Feng forces began to lose their tactical advantages. Additionally, emboldened by successfully defending their planet, the Humani began to regroup and rally the rest of the UIC forces in the Charted Galaxies. They even rallied a few from the Uncharted Sectors who wished to remain free from Feng oversight. All this was due to the serendipitous folly of the Humans.

With the sudden reprieve and extra breathing room, the UIC were able to train the Humans more properly, and they became more of an asset in the war than any of the other races had anticipated, despite their first impression.

Just as he slipped back into his officer's uniform, Captain Utang's com lit up. "Captain, Admiral Teng wishes to speak to you."

Utang wiped his eyes and composed himself. "Very well."

A holographic representation of Admiral Teng materialized. Utang stood and saluted him properly, crossing his arms and banging his large fists on his chestplate and then extending them in front of him. "Admiral."

Teng returned the salute. "Captain, I have new orders."

"Yes, sir."

"The emperor is initiating talks with the United Intergalactic Coalition." This displeased Utang, but he did his best to conceal it. "I know this upsets you," said Admiral Teng, seeing through Utang's veneer.

"My feelings on the matter are irrelevant, Admiral."

Teng grinned, unconvinced. "The emperor is hoping to have the sanctions relaxed. However, you would be happy to know that while he is engaged in farcical negotiations with the Barberoi, he has ordered that Operation: Catalyst continue moving into the next phase."

"Yes, sir. Consider it done."

“Very well, Captain,” said the Admiral, saluting. “To the glory of the Old Feng Empire.”

Utang returned the salute, and the transmission terminated. He turned to return to the bridge of his command carrier when his com toned another incoming call.

He acknowledged the call, and a holographic image of General Yoshi Utang appeared before him. “How are you, little brother?”

“This is an inopportune time,” said Mongo.

Yoshi frowned, his eyes reproachful. “You have been in the Aether again. Why do you torture yourself with the past?”

Mongo narrowed his eyes, his glare intense. “What you call torture, I call motivation. There will come a time when we will have our vengeance.”

“Which is more important, your revenge or the glory of the empire?”

Mongo left the Aether cell and began his walk to the bridge, Yoshi’s image following him. “Fortunately for me, Yoshi, the two are not mutually exclusive.”

“Always remember, Mongo, the empire comes first.”

Mongo smiled. “I must go now. I have the business of the empire to attend to.”

Yoshi nodded and terminated the link, his image flickering and then disappearing.

Captain Utang’s blood was on fire. He would live out his destiny to avenge his father’s defeat. The bureaucratic socialists of the UIC were going to pay, and the Feng Empire would bring freedom and peace to the galaxies once more.

* * *

Planet: Feng

The Feng Imperial Palace, armored with a thick coating of ice, stood in defiance to the frigid wind as the turbulent sky swirled above it. Surrounded by silver-chromed industrial spheres hovering over endless ice fields, it appeared to be the center of its own universe.

Emperor Hiron sat with Monsu Kazar, the Vice Executor of the Feng Empire, in their palatial conference room awaiting the UIC Committee on Foreign Relations to convene. Hiron sat in full battle armor—heavy chest plate, jagged shoulder armor, horned helmet, and cape. Vice Executor Kazar donned the simple, purple robes of a politician. His past military term was more ceremonial than functional, and he had therefore never seen battle.

The conference table's legs were adorned with carvings of Feng Dynasty heroes of battle—kings, emperors, and generals—in various mid-action poses. Each leg wove a tale in stunning relief. Some were past tales of Feng legend and lore, and some were portents of the future, as in the Prophecy of the Ice Dragon restoring the grandeur of the Feng Dynasty over its many enemies far and wide.

There was a light and a tone, and Emperor Hiron pressed a button on the conference table. Holographic images of foreign ministers appeared in the seats around the long, ornate conference table, as holographic representations of Hiron and Kazar appeared across space in the other participants' conference and meeting rooms.

"Good day to you, Emperor Hiron," said Tolstoi Remu, the Humani Foreign Minister. The words registered in Feng through Hiron's implanted universal translator chip. A typical Humani, she was tall and slender with grey skin and dark, braided hair in the Humani tribal tradition. She wore the drab but functional ministerial garb of the UIC. "Vice Executor Kazar," she added, almost as an afterthought.

"Good day," returned Emperor Hiron. Kazar only nodded his acknowledgement.

Around the table in clockwise order was Bobot Tegrit, the diminutive, grey-skinned Viceroy of the Humani; Dvorak of the Vampiri (they were referred to by first name according to custom), sitting in his tight black garments, his face bearing the sickly pallor of his race, eyes as iridescent as they were intelligent; Shamel Legune, the large, rotund but otherwise humanoid-looking Homunculi Foreign Minister; Martin Rayban, the snarky, braggadocious Human Foreign Minister of Earth; Hubritia Liguri, the lanky, mantis-like Firenz Foreign Minister.

"We meet today to make progress towards an accord that would allow each of our worlds to live and let live," announced Tolstoi Remu in an officious tone.

"I have reviewed your terms," answered Hiron. "They hardly allow the Feng to live at all with all of the sanctions the United Intergalactic Coalition has placed on our people—freezing our credit, interfering with our investments around the galaxy, trade embargoes."

"We realize that," said Tolstoi Remu, "and we have composed a set of mutually beneficial stipulations that we believe, as representatives of the United Intergalactic Coalition, should they be agreed upon by the Feng Empire, will allow us to lift economic sanctions."

"What are these stipulations?" asked Emperor Hiron.

Tolstoi Remu looked to Shamel Legune and nodded, signaling him to elaborate the terms. Shamel pressed a button on his respective

conference table, and a digital list floated in the air. As Shamel Legune began to read each term, the words grew in size for tracking and emphasis.

"Term number one," said Legune. "The Feng Empire is to cease any subsequent research and development of further weapons technologies. All weapons development sites are to be converted to basic science research facilities.

"Term number two: the Feng are to grant access to representatives of the United Intergalactic Coalition of the said sites and any sites suspected of engaging in the development of weapons technology and submit to regular, unscheduled inspections of these sites.

"Term number three: the Feng are to share any and all developments in shipbuilding technology with the appointed representatives of the United Intergalactic Coalition in the interest of fair and free trade.

"These stipulations were drawn up in the best interest and safety of the worlds affiliated with the United Intergalactic Coalition, autonomous worlds and peoples, and the worlds and peoples of the Uncharted Sectors as well as the Feng Empire for the purpose of the greater intergalactic good."

Shamel Legune then paused, indicating that he was finished. The list of terms was uploaded onto Emperor Hiron's and Vice Executor Kazar's digital displays for further inspection and consideration.

"What say you, Emperor Hiron of the Feng Empire?" prompted Tolstoi Remu.

Hiron looked around the conference table, amused at the arrogance of such terms. Although the other foreign ministers were only present as holograms, he sensed the tension and air of nervous anticipation of his reaction to these terms.

"Let me begin by stating that I hardly see anything of fairness in the terms of this accord for the Feng people."

"I assure you that this accord is in the best interest of all the parties involved," insisted Tolstoi Remu. "What are your reservations?"

"What are my reservations?" chortled Hiron. "Where do I start? Term number one stipulating that we cease the development of all new weapons technology…the Feng Empire is but a shell of what it used to be." Hiron noticed self-satisfied smiles around the table at the uncharacteristic admission. "The United Intergalactic Coalition is vast and powerful. How do you expect us to defend ourselves should the need arise?"

"The development of new weapons technology would only be for the purpose of offense, not defense," said Hubritia Liguri of Firenz. "If

you are serious about entering into an accord, you must demonstrate your honorable intentions by abandoning an offensive posture."

Hiron wore a joyless grin. "How will the UIC demonstrate its honorable intentions? Are the worlds and races of the United Intergalactic Coalition going to cease weapons development as well?"

"That has not been raised as a stipulation in this accord," said Tolstoi Remu. Hiron looked for a flash of color in the Humani minister, but the holographic technology masked such displays of emotion. Humani epidermal microexpressions could only be seen in the flesh.

"Of course not," said Hiron. "So, while the United Intergalactic Coalition continues to advance their weapons capabilities, the Feng people will be left behind, leaving us vulnerable." He looked at Hubritia Liguri. "Defensively speaking."

"The Feng are already way out in front of weapons development," offered Dvorak of the Vampiri. "Perhaps a hiatus will give the rest of us a chance to catch up, striking a balance. You are hardly helpless with legions of Cybions at your disposal. Not many would wish to tangle with those monstrosities."

"Besides," added Martin Rayban of Earth, "with all of the economic sanctions, you're hardly in a position to fund much weapons development."

"Might I add," said Tolstoi Remu, "that at its pinnacle, the Feng Empire with all of its superior weapons technology was brought down by a lesser race in the last Intergalactic War." Remu saw Rayban bristle at the remark, so he added. "A race that has now been advancing by leaps and bounds to join the rest of us."

"Nice save," said Martin Rayban sardonically. "Just remember, it took a 'lesser race' to turn the tide against the Feng Empire."

Eyes rolled around the table.

"I see that I am not going to receive any concessions on term number one," said Hiron. "So, let me address the other terms. You want access to Feng research and development sites for inspections. You want us to share our ship-building technology. Both terms are not only ridiculous, but they violate our very culture. The Feng are a private people not inclined to open their borders to…outsiders."

"You mean 'Barberoi?'" asked Hubritia Liguri. "That was the term you were going to use."

"What about our right to intergalactic patent?" asked Hiron.

"The United Intergalactic Coalition does not recognize patents from non-member worlds," said Tolstoi Remu.

"This is a total lack of consideration of our cultural beliefs and values," added Vice Executor Kazar, speaking for the first time. "I thought that the United Intergalactic Coalition stood for respect for

other cultures."

Tolstoi Remu pulled down the corners of his mouth. "Frankly, Vice Executor Kazar, this respect is extended to member worlds and autonomous worlds, as long as they are stable and pose no threat. How else can we assure that the Feng have indeed ceased all new development of weapons technology?"

"Particularly when it is the cultural belief of the Feng not to honor agreements made with…outsiders," added Martin Rayban.

"May I address the Council, Emperor?" asked Vice Executor Kazar. Emperor Hiron nodded his consent.

Kazar consulted his copy of the proposed accord. "So far, all I see are terms that benefit the United Intergalactic Coalition and place the Feng people (ever the politician, he purposely avoided the word 'empire') at a tremendous disadvantage, exposing us.

"Our government is struggling to feed its people as we speak. The United Intergalactic Coalition purports that it serves to protect the civil rights of all life. By leaving ourselves unarmed and unequipped, by sharing our ship-building technology, by allowing outsiders to conduct inspections…none of this inspires confidence in the emperor.

"What you are asking will likely cause revolution, which in turn will afford the United Intergalactic Coalition the opportunity it has been waiting for to exercise the Pax Galactus Initiative.

"We can agree to stop the development of new weapons technology and allow your inspections, but doing so without some other compensation would lead to our collapse and the UIC marching in and imposing its boiler-plate constitution and regulations. What you are proposing is a sneaky brand of imperialism. Planet Feng would become another colony in your menagerie of supplicant worlds."

"That is not how our members feel about the United Intergalactic Coalition," asserted Tolstoi Remu.

"You claim to respect the rights of stable autonomous worlds," said Kazar. "Yet, you are threatening to destabilize ours so that you can topple our government."

What are you suggesting?" asked Tolstoi Remu, suggesting his hands were tied on the matter.

Emperor Hiron saw the door that Kazar opened, saw the opportunity before him, and he capitalized on the opportunity. "We need aid in the form of funding."

"That's preposterous," said Tolstoi Remu.

"To provide fiscal aid to the Feng Empire would be like personally funding our enemy," snickered Bobot Tegrit, who until this moment sat silently, listening to the exchange.

"You claim to want to strike an accord in the name of peace,"

pressed Emperor Hiron. “Yet, you drafted terms that would lead to a hostile takeover of the Feng by your United Intergalactic Coalition. This is just another contrived…no, engineered, nation-building exercise.”

“I can assure you that this is not our intention,” said Tolstoi Remu.

“I have already admitted that we are not the empire we used to be,” said Hiron. “Vice Executor Kazar indicated to you that our government is on the verge of implosion. If we agree to the rems of this accord, then we need to be given the means to succeed as a non-aggressor world.”

“He has a point,” said Martin Rayban, drawing dirty looks from the others around the table.

“Let us recess to consider your proposal and reconvene at a later time to continue negotiations,” said Tolstoi Remu. Everyone around the table, reluctant to agree to this idea of fiscal aid to the Feng, nodded their enthusiastic agreement to recess.

“I look forward to your response,” said Emperor Hiron, failing to mask his sarcasm.

The holographs of the foreign ministers vanished into thin air, and the conference room was once again private and secured by the Feng digital firewalls.

“I cannot believe they are actually going to consider rendering fiscal aid,” said Kazar, incredulous.

Hiron considered his vice executor carefully. The man appeared to be a little too open to negotiating with the United Intergalactic Coalition. His admission of the possibility of governmental collapse to a council of Barberoi was borderline treason.

However, Emperor Hiron was pleased with this development, but for a different reason than his vice executor. Hiron had no intention of bowing to the United Intergalactic Coalition. If he played his cards right, he would lay the groundwork for Operation: Catalyst, in which case the bloated, stretched thin United Intergalactic Coalition would be in danger of implosion.

“You laid the foundation for my request for aid,” said Hiron, clapping a massive hand on the smaller man’s shoulder. “You have done well.”

Kazar beamed at the praise from the emperor.

“Now you must leave me to my thoughts,” said Hiron, standing up. “I have much to consider.”

Kazar rose, too, and bowed deeply. He left the room, leaving Emperor Hiron alone to calculate.

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